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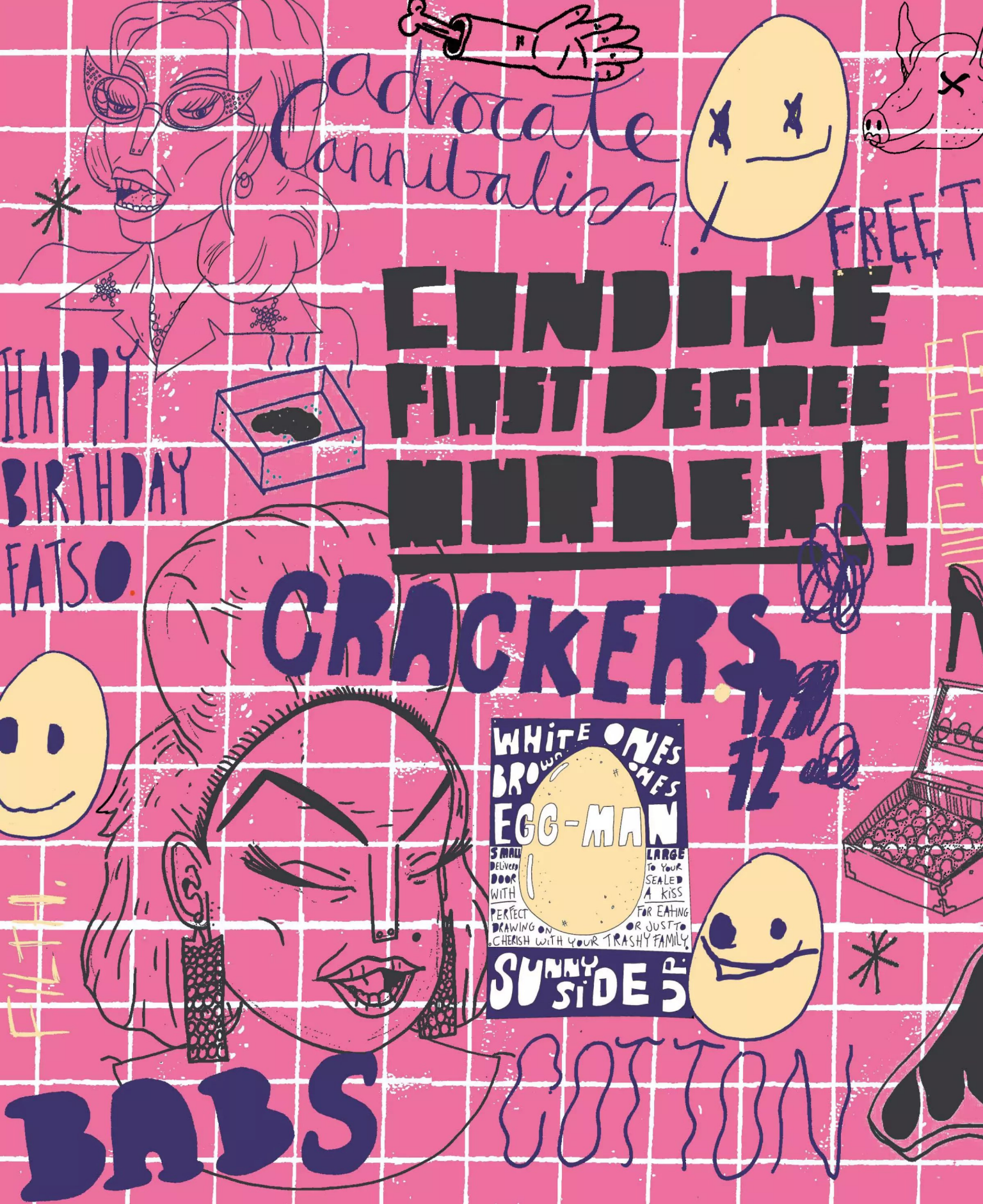
Little White Lies

TRUTH & MOVIES

PINK FLAMINGOS AT 50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SUNNY SIDE UP
BABS
COTTON

MARBLES
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ADOPTION AGENCY
PERSONALLY
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EAT SHIT
FILTH
IS MY POLITICS!
FILTH IS MY LIFE
WITH COMPLIMENTS OF THE CHEF!
WOOF!
DPPE
KILL EVERYONE NOW!
TRASH

THE PINK FLAMINGOS

50

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Directed by **JOHN WATERS**
Starring **DIVINE, DAVID LOCHARY, MINK STOLE**
Released **17 MARCH, 1972**

Pink Flamingos

John Waters' canonical index of bodily transgressions and hyper-kitsch pranks has been much imitated but never bettered. So happy 50th birthday to a masterpiece of wanton degredation that's also a charming document of good friends just having fun.

A beat-up mobile home is plonked in barren rural Maryland. Its after-market paint job is soot grey, matte, drab as the bald trees out back (we really are in "the sticks"). The whole tableau would be quite depresso were it not for the statement-pastel panels wrapped around the trailer in Pepto-Bismol pink – the same shade as the flamboyance of plastic flamingos standing sentinel to this, Pandora's trash can. Inside lurk suburban sex pests, gender gremlins, an egg fetishist and the filthiest person alive – tabloid certified! They're ready and waiting to perform – per the film's tagline – "an exercise in poor taste".

First uncaged in 1972, *Pink Flamingos* details the exploits of two warring filthfluencer clans: one, a loud-mouthed household led by a psychopathic drag queen; the other, a pair of clout-chasing sadist baby-farmers with a taste for toes. As the ne'er-do-well nemeses hunt each other across Baltimore, they revel in all manner of dirty deeds to get their coveted column inches. Mixing *Looney Tunes* humour with DIY gore and a penchant for porno chic mores, the polarising film is reviled and revered as a prototypical midnight movie and exemplar of "abject art".

Pink Flamingos was written, directed, produced, narrated, shot and edited by Maryland miscreant John Waters. Aged 25 at the time, he borrowed $12,000 from his Dad to make a low-budget collision of '50s kitsch pastiche and '70s queer politics. The final product was both an avant-garde art film fit for the experimental circuit, and a trashtastic jeremiad against America's conservative status quo.

In its golden anniversary year, the film's reputation as a controversial cult classic endures. Many cinephiles are familiar with the story of its coprophilic finale, even if they're yet to see the real deal (high quality digital copies of the film were rare as hen's teeth prior to the Criterion Collection's recent 4K restoration). So, 50 years on from its initial release, what can be learned from Waters' notorious missive?

Let's return to that wayward mobile home (pronounced "moo-bill hoom" for comic effect) on the outskirts of Phoenix, MD. Its criminal occupants are matriarch Divine (the femme alter-ego of hairdresser Glenn Milstead), her adult son Crackers (Danny Mills), the family's infantile grandma Edie (Edith Massey, a Waters stalwart) and their travelling

companion Cotton (the director's childhood best friend, Mary Vivian Pearce). The fugitive crew is on the lam, so Divine – both a character within the film, and the actor's real-world drag persona – assumes the pseudonym 'Babs Johnson' to evade Johnny Law and the evening papers.

Meanwhile, in suburban Baltimore, sickeningly middle-class married couple Connie and Raymond Marble (more of the filmmaker's friends: Mink Stole and David Lochary) turn green with envy upon discovering that local rag *The Midnight* has pronounced Divine, "The filthiest person alive!" Apoplectic that their thriving small business – a black market baby ring hawking newborns to lesbian couples – has been unjustly snubbed, the go-getting Marbles hatch a plan to snatch Divine's grimy crown. The plot devolves into a series of increasingly perverse pranks, gotchas and booby traps. It culminates in a kangaroo court-cum-press conference and, you guessed it, multiple public executions.

Pink Flamingos doesn't exactly ring with the technical prowess that most base-level American films tend to offer as standard. Waters' portable 16mm camera recorded sound directly onto the film stock, 24 frames ahead of the picture. That's ideal for playback through a projector, but effectively useless when it comes to splicing multiple takes of the same scene. As such, much of the action unfurls in master shots, with camera operator Waters panning across faces, or shonkily zooming in and out, searching for pertinent details.

These lengthy takes also mean that, when cuts between scenes do arrive, they announce themselves with the subtlety of blunt force trauma. Though mostly game, the players occasionally cross the frame with a tinge of clumsy discomfort. This seems partly due to messy blocking, but also because the shooting locations – especially those in and around the trailer – appear to be colder than a witch's tit. By and large, *Pink Flamingos* looks, sounds and feels like a labour of love, cobbled together on a wing and a prayer by enthusiastic amateurs – because that's exactly what it was.

Most of the cast, as noted, are Waters' bosom buddies from Baltimore traps like the downtown gay and beatnik scenes. Many had worked on the director's previous films, and would continue to serve at the Pope of Trash's altar, even as he veered toward the (comparative) mainstream further on down the track. They earned their own nickname, The Dreamlanders, in honour of Waters' company, Dreamland Productions. A more sordid answer to Warhol's superstars, the Dreamlanders engage goblin mode in *Pink Flamingos*, cussing and fucking and chewing (or, rather, licking) the scenery. They spew histrionic dialogue with speed-freak intensity, which lends this exploitation flick a sense of hysterical melodrama more befitting of a pre-World War Two 'woman's picture'. MVP is Divine, who spouts Mae West-esque witticisms with all the salty self-assurance of a veteran Hollywood glamour puss.

The so-called filthiest person alive is also a sight to behold, and this film produced arguably her most iconic image. Her hair starts halfway to the back of her scalp, bleached and teased into a sunflower bouffant with a few inches of seedy regrowth. This receding hairline makes way for the batwing eyebrows flying up and off her forehead. She wears a fire engine red frock, replete with fishtail frill, and cocks a pistol at the viewer, egging them to look upon her with shame, disgust or disdain. Just try it. (Credit also to Waters' costume designer Van Smith and art director Vincent Peranio, as the film's vivacious visual style belies its shoestring budget.)

"While it is said that one cannot polish a turd, Waters' joyful specimen suggests that you can at least gift wrap it."

While it is said that one cannot polish a turd, Waters' joyful specimen suggests that you can at least gift wrap it. From there, it's just a matter of getting it into the hands of the right people.

Following a sold-out premiere at the University of Baltimore, *Pink Flamingos*' fledgling distributor New Line Cinema winged the film into New York City's Elgin Theater, where Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970) had been a midnight mainstay in 1971. Pitched at college potheads, long-haired dropouts and other denizens of the counterculture, the cinematic depravity was hyped by a trailer that used no actual footage from the film itself – just a slew of bewitched and titillated talking heads reacting to the smut *du jour*. The final soundbite comes from a bespectacled young man in a cowboy hat. "I think John Waters has got his finger on the pulse of America," he says. "I think he's got his thumb securely up America's ass."

Pink Flamingos was spawned in a primordial soup that brimmed with fixins like Nixon, the Vietnam War, the Golden Age of Porn, the Manson Family rampage and subsequent trial, the Stonewall riots, and much more. By 1970, the sun had well and truly set on the Summer of Love. Wrath and dissatisfaction were waxing, particularly in marginalised communities. As the Black power, gay liberation and feminist movements pushed forward, conservative Middle America clung ever more tightly to the white picket fences of post-war prosperity. The ironically named Dreamlanders found peace not in the suburban homogeneity of their childhoods, but in a gleeful creative chaos of their own design.

With tongue in cheek and rose between teeth, Waters serves up the West's most pressing obsessions – sex, violence and nostalgia – at a bacchanalian carnival for queers, delinquents and outcasts. In a film that depicts masturbation, animal cruelty, cannibalism, castration, forced pregnancy, incest and rape (often for laughs), one of the most memorable scenes sees Divine in a leopard print wiggle dress passing by the stars and stripes as it flaps on a flagpole while Little Richard sings 'The Girl Can't Help It' – 'it' being shoplifting a steak between her thighs. Waters is a master in the art of transgression, and he's also an authority in the practice of play.

From the 1950s rock 'n' roll needle drops (which he initially used sans permission) to the Marbles' hyper-colour hairdos (the carpets match the drapes) and the ribald dialogue ("You fucking little dingleberry!"), *Pink Flamingos* is frequently silly, in an almost childlike way. Beyond Edie's playpen, the film embraces nudity, injury, swearing, gluttony and, of course, bowel movements, without a whiff of shame. A sense of freedom ferments throughout what is, at heart, the hippie equivalent of theatre kids putting on skits for their friends.

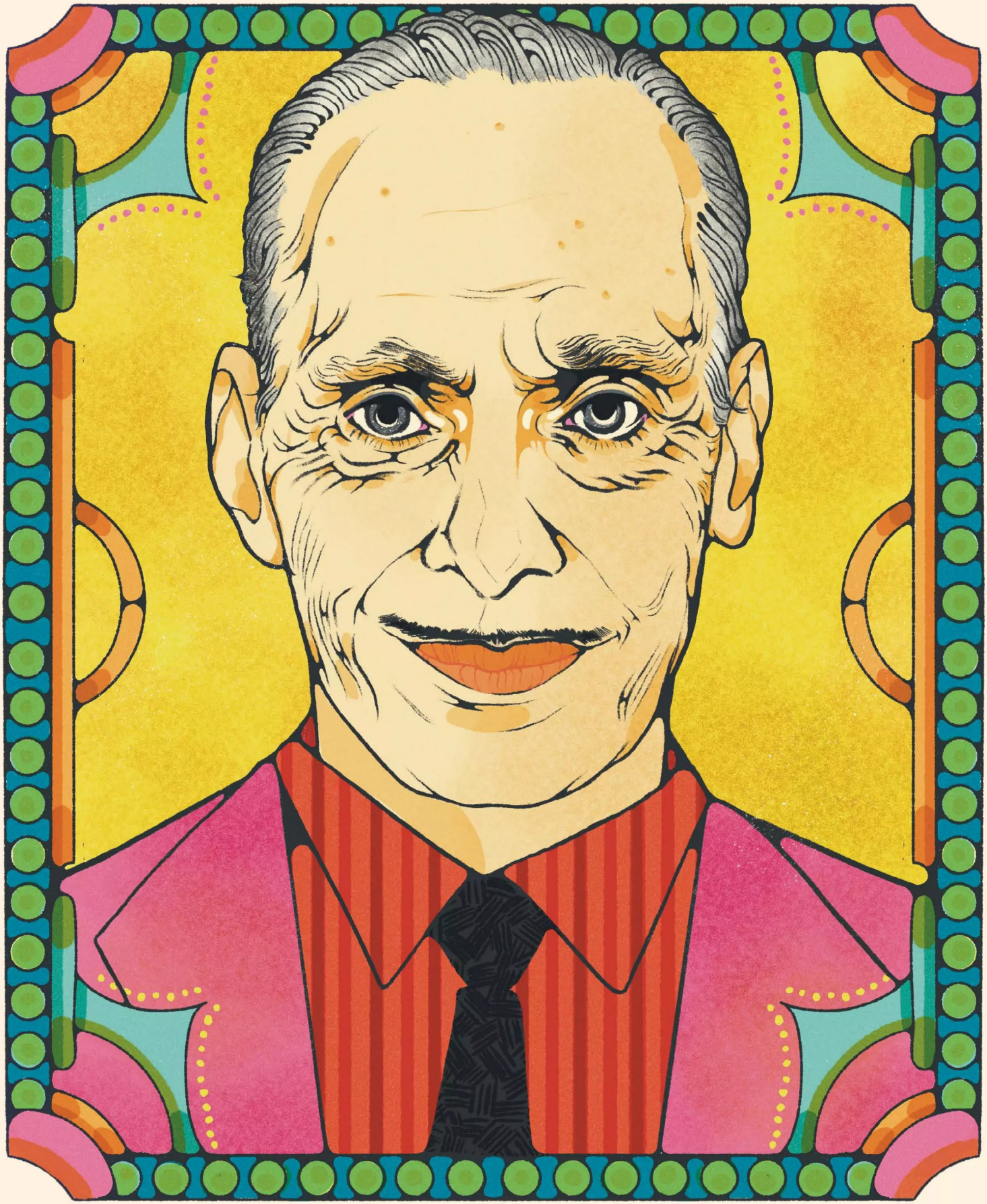
'Unapologetic authenticity' is the watermark to which today's influencers aspire, but there's a disingenuity to eating clean on curated feeds. Even once radical spaces like drag and Pride are prone to the clucking tongues of imposed respectability. As capitalism finds new ways to commodify queer culture, we sashay away from the term's subversive intent – the one hitting full flight in *Pink Flamingos*. Given the sanitised state of today's conglomerate pop media, this film's greatest gift is its zero-tolerance policy on hypocrisy, a crime here punishable by death.

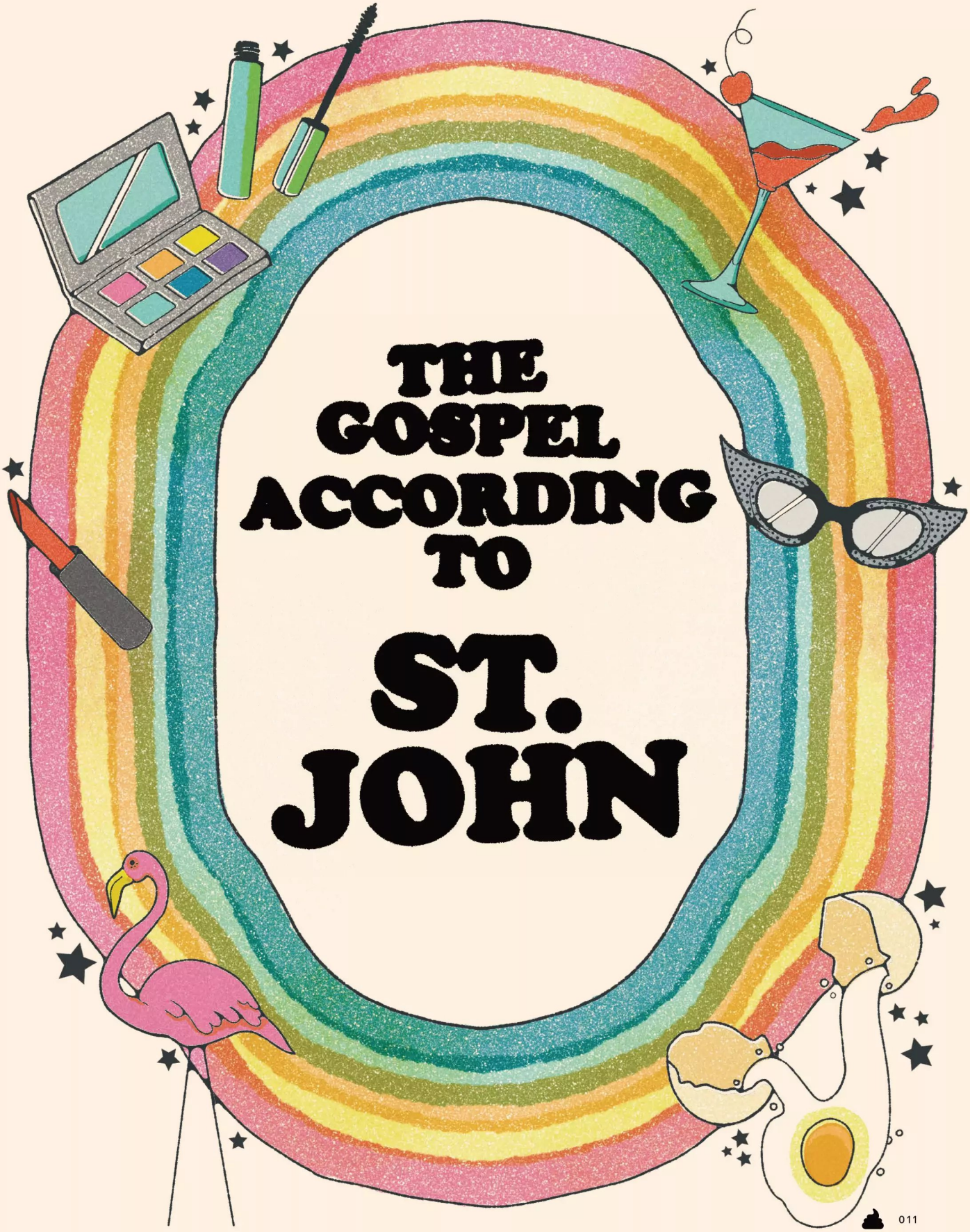
AIMEE KNIGHT

ANTICIPATION
In an age of Devil's advocates and provocateurs, how will this glory hole hold up? **4**

ENJOYMENT
If the trailer's a-rockin', do come a-knockin' – with forewarnin'. It's a lot. **5**

IN RETROSPECT
Be gay, do crime. **5**




THE
GOSPEL
ACCORDING
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ST.
JOHN

Words and interview by **JUAN BARQUIN** *Illustration by* **LYDIA SILVER**

The Pope of Trash on 50 years of Pink Flamingos *and waking up each morning to try and be nuts in new and exciting ways.*

Many have tried to censor John Waters. Many have tried to silence John Waters. Many have tried to, if you will, "cancel" John Waters. For every person who is aghast at his brand of art, there is another trying desperately to get him to join their cause (some more hateful than others). For every controversial statement he makes, another exists that makes him all the more endearing. Half a century into his career, it's clear that John Waters is a man who will continue to say and create whatever he damn well pleases, with no boundary other than the limitations of his own imagination.

This ceaseless drive to entertain and share his opinions and experiences – be it by directing films, writing memoirs, making cameos in small films, touring all over the world, donating his art collection, ranking his favourite films of any given year – is one of the things that has kept Waters as something of a cultural centrepiece for nearly two decades since his last feature. But what really shines about the artist, having been clear since *Pink Flamingos* (which now marks its 50th anniversary with a fresh Criterion restoration) and still obvious in his first novel 'Liarmouth', is how much love he has for the ever fucked-up human race.

LWLies: With your new novel 'Liarmouth', a spoken word tour comeback, and the restoration of *Pink Flamingos* coming out, this year feels like a big return to the world for you since the pandemic shut things down. How does it feel to be back?

Waters: Well, it feels weird because I actually did a Christmas tour this year and the one before, and the new strain happened right on the last two days. The whole thing could have been cancelled, but I *did* do 18 cities, so otherwise I was back and writing the book the whole time. I write every day anyway in my house, so it didn't make it easier or harder for me; it was kind of always the same. Being back now, I'm out full-tilt really. I did five spoken word shows, did eight cities on the book tour, and now I'm going to Europe. I'm on the road again and it feels so good. I am happy to be in touch with my audience and actually see them, but Covid has changed everything, so it's still scary. I think audiences are thinking too: this might be the last night I ever go out. When they come to readings, I joke, "This might be the last book you ever read" and they all freeze, but then laugh. That's kind of what the book does to you too, and hopefully all my work is like that.

Absolutely. If *Pink Flamingos* was the last movie I saw in theatres, I wouldn't be too sad about it.

And you're going to see it legally in the UK for the first time!

Which is so shocking!

The BBFC has this amazing article about all the different times where they could have put in different scenes, but never all of them, for different reasons and societal changes. So, this is the first time that they have put every cut scene back in, restored for your viewing pleasure. Finally, the UK is mature enough to be able to see *Pink Flamingos* without being rushed to mental institutions.

I watched the new restoration with a friend and he noted, "It'd be wild to see this in a screening with people in this day and age because you'd have to give everyone the world's longest list of trigger warnings."

It's true and the audience that comes to see it would laugh even more because of that. *Desperate Living* is the film I've done that will probably be the last Criterion ever does if they do them all, which would be my ultimate reason to be on Earth, but when they showed that [which features Edith Massey ordering

guards to gang rape Mary Vivian Pearce] in Australia, the whole audience yelled, "Seize her and fuck her!" before it started. I think everybody's in on the joke. I always made fun of the rules of the society I lived in that was supposedly "outsider". I made fun of hippie rules in *Multiple Maniacs*. I made fun of gay and trans rules in *Desperate Living*. And I make fun of hippies, drag, taste and everything in *Pink Flamingos*. It is my war film. I didn't go to Vietnam, but I had that.

It is politically charged, even though presented jokingly. "What are your politics?" "Kill everyone now."

But that's not *real* politics. Divine was living innocently in her trailer, writing her memoirs, just like Elizabeth Taylor was in *Boom!* Then she was challenged by people that were jealous, were second rate to her, and were bitter. She became violent because she was attacked, but Divine let everybody live on their own. She was nice, unless she was attacked, and those people had to pay.

I feel like that very much stands today, particularly regarding the politics of how everyone's rights are constantly being attacked and what we, maybe, should do about that.

I think the first thing we have to be able to do is laugh at ourselves. It gives you the freedom to do so many things in humour that you don't get to do if you're lecturing somebody. I think if you're lecturing, making people have no fun and feel bad, they go to the other side. It works sort of in reverse.

All your films have this sensibility and, now with four releases by Criterion, they're more accessible than ever. What's the restoration process like for you? It's wild how clean everything looks without ever sacrificing its original quality.

That's right – but I didn't have those scratches there on purpose. I would have taken them out then if I could have. What is the point of restoring a movie? Yes, you have to keep the original feeling of the movie, which I think they have, but there's no way to clean up the script. Let's make it look as good as we can, so more people can see it. It still has the feeling of the movie; it was so quickly shot on such cheap equipment and at a time when I didn't know what I was doing yet. That's still there. You can't suddenly make it look like a movie that everybody's going to walk out of saying, 'Boy, the cinematography was good.' I always think that's the first thing people say if the movie is bad though.

Would you say it was sort of haphazardly put together?

It's not haphazard. The film was completely written and rehearsed, actors had to memorise pages of dialogue for each take, and it was shot as best I could. To me, *Pink Flamingos* looks brilliant technically compared to *Multiple Maniacs*. It was the first colour movie I ever made, it was shot on magnetic sound, and we were learning as we went along. There wasn't a big crew or anything, I just rented the equipment from this guy that illegally got it from a television station.

There's something really admirable about how much of it pops because of its scrappy nature. Even something as simple as you holding the camera on a trailer as it burns down.

You could look at it two ways: it's either bad editing – yes, it's too long – or pyromania. We went through all that trouble, so I wanted you to see every frame of it. At the same time, you start laughing because I'm clearly waiting for the trailer to fall over, and I should have cut out some middle shots, but then the continuity would have been bad.

There's even a moment where Mink Stole's coat almost catches on fire.

She almost catches on fire, yes. My family's business was fire protection equipment, and the only safety we had there was

my poor brother – who later took over my father's company and his daughter runs it now – with one fire extinguisher in the middle of the woods with thousands of dead trees and leaves everywhere. The whole thing could have been worse than *Bambi* if we had run in the wrong direction. Nothing happened, but we didn't warn the neighbours or anything, so they panicked. Having heard that some hippies were up in the woods making a movie, they left us alone. When the fire happened, we just said sorry, and the fire engines never came or anything, but you could see it was a big fire.

It genuinely looks very dangerous on screen, especially because of the documentary-like quality the whole thing has.

Yeah, it does look like a documentary and that's why people thought it was real. People later used to say, 'Do you still live in the trailer?' Didn't they see it burn? They thought it was real that Divine lived in that trailer and ate dog shit. Yes, it was 20-hour shooting days, but no, none of it was real.

"I believe that dog facelifts are not that far away in our future."

So what led to its birth originally?

What led to its birth was after having Divine eating a cow's heart in *Multiple Maniacs*, that was training wheels to eating shit. What led to it was I had just been to the Manson trial, and they actually *were* the filthiest people alive. It was overly theatrical and crazy and scared people. Then *Deep Throat* had become illegal, so there was nothing left that you couldn't do. So we tried to say: well, what can you do that will make people crazy that isn't even illegal yet?

That ties into something I noticed revisiting all of your work. There's a certain sense of escalation and challenge to everything: how far can I go?

Yeah, but it was all about how far Divine could go. How far you go is how all comedy, even today, is made, and there's very much an edge that you have to balance on. That made my whole career. But I think, since I always make fun of things I really like, that's why I've lasted this long, even if you hate me.

It even shows up in 'Liarmouth' a lot, which I tore through. It's like reading an endless roller coaster of absurdity, without ever losing the element of surprise.

I hope that's because I'm trying to surprise myself. In writing, I'm the first audience I have. I'm trying to make myself laugh and surprise myself. If I can surprise me, then the audience that comes along for the ride – that orders a book in advance, doesn't wait to see if it's well received, and believes in it – they're the ones I want to make laugh first. It's always a pleasant surprise when that laughter trickles over and I can go further and further. Even though it's crazy, I tried to write it like it's very serious, like everything can possibly happen. The characters believe in their insane missions, no matter what they are. I never tried to wink at you. When you buy the book, you already knew I winked by calling it a "feel-bad romance", so I'm just asking you to laugh and keep turning those pages.

All of your work has this balance of making characters who are sort of insane but also very real and relatable people in many years.

It's all possible. There definitely are people that are obsessed with trampolining and I believe that dog facelifts are not that far away in our future. It could all happen, but sometimes it's pushed to one level too much.

It's always been there for you too. Jumping between filth, from chicken fucking and forced impregnation to murder and singing assholes, to sweetness, like Edie and the Egg Man, which is truly romantic.

It *is* romantic and, in the new version, there's a whole scene that got cut where the Egg Man asks for Edie's hand in marriage to Divine and Cotton. He talks about why he's gonna love her, keep her safe and always bring her eggs. I like my characters and I want them to be happy. Even the villains, whoever they

“Danny [Mills] was arrested for the world’s largest LSD ring with his girlfriend. Later, they asked me to be a witness.”

are, and I don’t usually think anybody really is the villain. Well, in *Pink Flamingos* the Marbles are definitely the villain.

You say you love your characters and I think it shows. Do you always have a certain level of empathy for them?

I wouldn’t ask you to spend time with somebody I hated. Society might hate Masha Sprinkle [the protagonist of ‘Liarmouth’], and you might hate her if you knew her or were one of her victims, but at the same time, you’re rooting for her and how terrible she is. And she does actually have a reason to be that terrible when she finally confesses her sexual background. It’s a ridiculous and ludicrous memory, but there is a reason why she acts like that.

It’s the whole concept of “trauma in art” taken to the most ridiculous level. She just got a rimjob.

On her wedding. She thought that’s what romance was.

Which is so absurd and hilarious to laugh at.

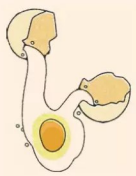
And you’re laughing with *me* who is telling the story.

Laughing with each other seems key to your work and I’d love to know about sort of existing with all the Dreamland actors and having this weird little family that you made movies with.

They were just my friends. It was like a repertory group in a theatre. So *Pink Flamingos* was just the next movie we were going to make. People say “it only cost $10,000”, and actually it cost $12,000, but that was a fortune to us. That was a huge budget compared to *Multiple Maniacs*’ $5,000. It felt like we were working in the big time and had rehearsals for weeks beforehand. Like Mink [Stole] says, “We went for it. That’s what all people do. You go for it.” You group together and you’re all running. Even Danny [Mills], who played Cracker, was almost the real character. He said, “Should I bleach my hair?” and I told him no, y’know? We were all into it. It wasn’t like a political call to action to go make this movie to confront the world. It was just us joyously making the next movie.

There’s something kind of radical about just being queer and making art.

Nobody was queer except me, Divine, and David. Mink wasn’t, Mary Vivian Pierce wasn’t, and Danny definitely was not. When we had the whole scene where Divine blew him, they kept wanting to laugh because they were friends and Danny wasn’t one bit gay.



It’s like this perfect bundling together of different identities in a familial sense.

Danny was arrested for the world’s largest LSD ring with his girlfriend. Later they asked me to be a character witness. I said, “If I’m your character witness, you’re going to jail.” I wanted him to be Gater in *Female Trouble* and he wouldn’t because he was a draft dodger and was scared the attention would get him arrested. He was just in love with Mary Vivian Pierce when we made the movie. I think it was about all of us hanging around together. That’s what our life was like. We didn’t always hang around with all gay people, all straight, but we hung around with every kind of person that didn’t

fit in. We created our own minority. Still, to this day, I never understand things like Bear Week because it's so bizarre. Why does everybody just want to have friends or have sex with people that look exactly like them? Twinks? There are hundreds of them. It's like a boy band convention. I guess they all just like mirror images, which I never did or else I would be married to Steve Buscemi.

I would watch that queer rom-com though.

Steve is my friend and we joke about it all the time. He is sick of it and told me people think he's Don Knotts. And I think Don Knotts looks like Mick Jagger, who I think looks great.

So how does it feel to know that the things you created have had such longevity and impact in so many different ways?

Well, it's incredibly flattering and gratifying and I'm really proud of it. I thank audiences every time I'm in a space for allowing me to get away with this; allowing me to put out another book that's totally crazy, to put out movies, and to keep having them come back. Without their support, it would have never happened, because in the beginning, no critics liked them, so it was really the audience that made them be remembered. And now there's new audiences! Half of them weren't even born when I made *Pink Flamingos*.

Including me. I think my first encounter with you was probably The Simpsons' 'Homer's Phobia', which I still cherish deeply to this day. I can't help but think about how many only discovered you through *Drag Race* or the *Hairspray* musical.

There are some who only know me from *Seed of Chucky* or the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* movie or an Yves Saint Laurent ad. I mean, on this book tour, they're younger than they've ever been and I think that is the ultimate compliment. If you can get new young people that don't say, 'Oh, this is old hat. I've seen this before,' to me, that is amazing and really gratifying. My audience is old and dying, you know, so you have to replace them and get new ones.

That's a testament to how fresh you keep everything.

You're right. I just wake up every day and try to be freshly nuts

JOHN WATERS: AN OEUVRE

Words by **LUCY VIPOND**

1. Mondo Trasho 1969

The one with the chicken execution

Supported by a compilation of unlicensed pop music, *Mondo Trasho* follows Divine after hitting a woman with her car. She keeps her unconscious victim like a doll, dressing her up and rolling her around town in a wheelchair while experiencing intense hallucinations of the Virgin Mary.

2. Multiple Maniacs 1970

The one with the rosary-job

An unholy tale of biblical proportions, *Multiple Maniacs* once again centres around Divine as the ringleader of a perverted circus with a pastime of killing. Her boyfriend's infidelity provides the catalyst for a religious awakening, a murder spree, and an unsavoury encounter with a giant lobster.

3. Pink Flamingos 1972

The one with the singing anus, faeces in the mail, homocide, incest, dog shit, abduction...

Waters weaved every taboo yet to be stigmatised or imagined into *Pink Flamingos*. The film pits criminal couple the Marbles against Babs Johnson and her family for the title of the 'filthiest people alive'. What ensues is an exercise in stomach strength as they sabotage and out-filth one another.

4. Female Trouble 1974

The one with no cha cha heels

Female Trouble follows the life of anti-heroine Dawn Davenport after she runs away from home and becomes muse to salon owners the Dashers, who believe "crime is beauty". Dawn then carries out a series of ludicrous crimes, leading to her final performance – in the electric chair.

5. Desperate Living 1977

The one with a potion of rabies and rat piss

A hedonistic kingdom of convicts, headed by evil Queen Carlotta and her leather clad soldiers, is the backdrop to this sick fairy tale. A social hypochondriac and her maid are exiled to Mortville where they encounter a lesbian couple and a treasonous Princess who plot an assasanation.

6. Polyester 1981

The one with the Baltimore foot stomper

Dirty shoes, flatulence, skunk and glue – take a whiff of *Polyester*, a melodrama following Francine Fishpaw whose suburban life falls apart when her family's deviance comes to light, leading to alcoholism, her husband's affair, her son's foot fetish, and her daughter's abortion.

7. Hairspray 1988

The one with the Hefty Hideaway girl

Hairspray charts the unlikely rise to local stardom for plus-size dancer Tracy Turnblad, who becomes a regular on *The Corny Collins Show*. As she turns out to be an advocate for integration, she out-dances, out-wits and out-morals the racist Von Tussle family.

8. Cry-Baby 1990

The one with the son of The Alphabet Killer

A smalltown greaser, nicknamed Cry-Baby for his ability to produce a single tear, falls in love with a square – so begins Waters' juvenile delinquent *Romeo & Juliet* musical. The two orphans have to face gossip, juvie, multiple rockabilly music numbers, and a high-stakes game of chicken before they can be together.

9. Serial Mom 1994

The one with white shoes after Labour Day

Moms just want to protect their family; Beverly Sutphin is no exception, even if it costs a few meaningless lives. With hobbies that include harassing her neighbours over the phone and listening to Ted Bundy tapes, Kathleen Turner's matriarch goes on a killing spree for the sake of her family and the sanctity of her neighbourhood.

10. Pecker 1998

The one with a tea-bagging ban

Pecker, a teenage urban photographer who captures both the mundanity and eccentricities of his home town, becomes the obsession of the nouveau riche New York art scene. But when this exposure leads those he photographs to ridicule him, he attempts to return to normality.

11. Cecil B Demented 2000

The one with the gerbil porno

Underground filmmaker Cecil B Demented and his entourage of cinema terrorists kidnap Hollywood actress Honey Whitlock to star in their outlaw picture. They pray to Andy Warhol, tattoo the names of auteurs on themselves and confront mainstream movies with both guns and original ideas.

12. A Dirty Shame 2004

The one with pubic hair in the air

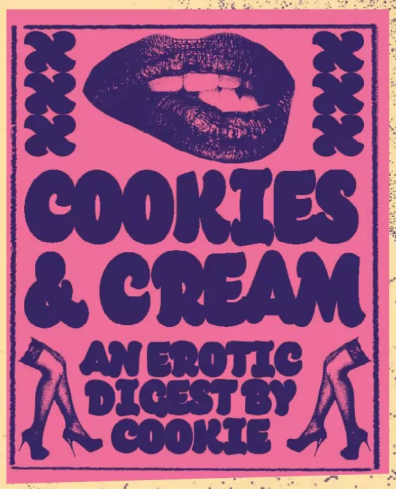
It's sex addicts vs professional prudes in this tale of sexual uprising in suburban Baltimore. A plague of horniness sweeps the townsfolk, while the 'neuters' rally for decency the townies romp towards a sex positive future – complete with a literal climax

Words by **CHARLES BRAMESCO** *Illustrations by* **EMMA BALEBELA**

THE DREAM-LANDERS: A WHO'S WHO

The Dreamlanders, so named for John Waters' Dreamland Productions, aren't just the director's stable of trusty actors and collaborators repeatedly popping up across his filmography, or even his muses. They're a family, organized around things more meaningful than blood: an identification with the Baltimore metropolitan area, for one, but also the uniting principles of filth and transgression.

As simpatico sickos, this collection of oddballs, misfits, and outcasts have formed a community that is reflected in a body of work consistently interested in weird, insular tribes. We'll introduce you to Divine properly over on page 22, but read on for a detailed index of all the other beautiful, hatchet-faced repertory players spinning trash into, well, golden trash.



Cookie Mueller

Role Call: Divine's sex-worker daughter Cookie in *Multiple Maniacs*; feminine-wiled spy Cookie in *Pink Flamingos*; petty criminal Concetta in *Female Trouble*.

Dossier: Raised in the Baltimore 'burbs, she penned a 300-plus-page book about the 1889 Johnstown Flood at age 11. Met Waters at the premiere of his first film *Mondo Trasho*, and later gave him the title for *Female Trouble* with her euphemistic description of a pelvic inflammatory disease. Her underground celebrity as an actress would soon be eclipsed by her talent as a writer, a posthumous collection of her short stories released earlier in 2022. She ran a medical advice column and critiqued art until her death at age 40 due to the same AIDS-related complications that took her husband, Italian artist Vittorio Scarpati.

Sainthood Moment: Her attempted espionage in *Pink Flamingos* turns into a blithely played rape at the hands of strapping young Crackers, a live chicken crushed betwixt their bodies.

BOB & WEAVE
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THIS ISSUE: DAVID LOCHRAY GIVES US A BLOW-DRY
BUTCH!
A SUSAN LOWE SPECIAL
LANDLADY MAGAZINE
FROM BAR TAPS TO EGG MEN
IS EDITH MASSEY THE WORLD'S GREATEST ACTOR?

David Lochary

Role Call:
Amputation-happy Dr. Coathanger in *Mondo Trasho*; co-writer on *The Diane Linkletter Story*; hair stylist throughout the early '70s

Dossier: Met Divine at the Marinella Beauty School, where the two became fast friends. He was known for his distinctive thin blue hair (coloured by magic marker, naturally) and facility with others' coiffures, often styling Divine's wigs and makeup for social outings. Frustrated by his inability to make the jump into the larger film world, he eventually fell out with Waters over money squabbles and fell into addiction. He died relatively young, in 1977, by falling through a glass table while under the influence of PCP, though that story remains possibly apocryphal.

Sainthood Moment: Scandalizing unsuspecting women in *Pink Flamingos* by flashing his penis, augmented with a tied-on turkey neck or kielbasa for the sake of length and girth.

Susan Lowe

Role Call:
Butch lesbian Mole McHenry in *Desperate Living*; pregnant receptionist Vikki in *Female Trouble*; paying pervert Suzi in *Multiple Maniacs*.

Dossier: Susan Lowe fell in with Divine and the rest while studying at Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art. Tended bar at a drag queen watering hole owned by a "sex maniac," where she'd sell her used underwear at $75 a pop to local lechers. Balanced bit parts in Waters' work with her own career as a visual artist, now her full-time vocation paired with a professorship at MICA. ("I might look like a whore, but I'm really a scholar," she says.) Her second cousin is noted serial killer and first-cousin-lover Fritz Klenner.

Sainthood Moment: Mole wins the lottery and spends her winnings on gender reassignment surgery, only to reverse the process with an amateur penectomy after her lover balks at the fresh phallus.

Edith Massey

Role Call:
Egg-obsessed mother Edie in *Pink Flamingos*; abusive Aunt Ida in *Female Trouble*; Edith the Barmaid (and the Virgin Mary) in *Multiple Maniacs*.

Dossier: Abandoned and orphaned in earliest girlhood, she ran away to Tinseltown as soon as she was old enough to pursue stardom. A soured marriage sent her back east to Baltimore, where she found employ pouring 15-cent drinks for dock workers and "hobos" at the now-defunct Pete's Hotel bar. Waters fell in love with her demeanour of demure sweetness and her gap-toothed smile, repeatedly casting her and helping her out with the formation of punk band Edie and the Eggs (featuring future Go-Gos drummer Gina Schock). Opened a thrift store called Edie's Shopping Bag and did some greeting-card modelling before relocating to Los Angeles.

Sainthood moment: Her bout of 'egg paranoia' in *Pink Flamingos*, as she frets that a theoretical chicken extinction could deprive her of her precious eggs.

Mary Vivian Pearce

Role Call:
Perfect attendance – however small the cameo, pops up in every single one of Waters' films.

Dossier: Grew up with Waters as a couple of Baltimorean hooligans, desperate to get out of the house and do their own thing. To that end, entered a sham marriage to a Saratoga jockey at 18 and used the freedom from her parents to abscond to Waters' waiting guest bed in Provincetown. Danced a "dirty boogie" known around their hometown as the "Bodie Green" (a play on the name of teen dance programme *The Buddy Deane Show*) in Waters' debut short *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, financed for $30 and never released. Scaled back her involvement with Waters' films over the years without ever fully leaving him, eventually getting her Master's in Creative Writing and settling down with family in her beloved Baltimore.

Sainthood Moment: Anally penetrates Lochary with a dildo in *Multiple Maniacs* to prove that she's worthy of joining the freakshow known as the Cavalcade of Perversions.

Mink Stole

Role Call:
The only other actor to make across-the-board appearances in the full Waters canon.

Dossier: Born Nancy Paine Stoll to a large Roman Catholic family uneasy about her involvement with Waters' retinue of ne'er-do-wells, though they'd come around once his films gained in recognition. Regularly appeared as the heel, some squaresville agent of The Man putting the kibosh on the disgusting fun. Made her way around the biz beyond Dreamland, going on to appear in queer cult classic *But I'm a Cheerleader* (her very presence an inside joke for garbage connoisseurs) and the women-in-prison homage *Stuck!*. A jack of all trades — toured nationwide as a cabaret act, performed as lead singer for Mink Stole and Her Wonderful Band, conducts weddings as an ordained minister.

Sainthood Moment: Tried by Divine in a kangaroo court for *Pink Flamingos*, ruled guilty of "asshole-ism," tarred and feathered, and finally executed by gunshot.

Elizabeth Coffey

Role Call:
The self-explanatory Chick with a Dick in *Pink Flamingos*.

Dossier: Born in Brooklyn and raised in Philly, she knew from a young age that she was a transgender woman, wearing her hair long and dating boys in her school days. Thumbed a ride from her Philadelphia home to Baltimore so she could catch the premiere of *Multiple Maniacs*, and instantly bewitched Waters with her Factory Girl good looks. She would become one of the first women to receive what was then called "sex change" surgery from Johns Hopkins in 1972. A short-lived career in film gave way to a second chapter in activism, pledging her support to organizations supporting AIDS patients and trans youth. Currently lives in Philly.

Sainthood Moment: Flips the script on a flasher in *Pink Flamingos* by exposing her penis to him, waggling it about as he runs in fear. (She'd get her operation one week later.)

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Words by **LILLIAN CRAWFORD** *Illustration by* **WANDA DUFNER**

THE DIVINE RIGHT OF QUEENS

Why drag deity Divine remains a fascinating case study for modern conceptions of gender.

There's a scene in John Waters's 1972 trashterpiece *Pink Flamingos* in which Divine, played by the drag queen of the same stage name, breaks into the house of Raymond and Connie Marble (David Lochary and Mink Stole) with her son, Crackers (Danny Mills). After licking the furniture to assert Divine's status as "the filthiest person alive", like a dog marking its territory, Divine fellates Crackers, an image that could only have been in worse taste if the sexual roles were reversed. As they rush down the stairs to escape, they pass framed film posters on the wall.

One of these films is *The Queen*, a spectacular 1968 documentary by Frank Simon about a drag contest hosted by the queen Flawless Sabrina in New York. Waters' reference to this groundbreaking film released four years prior to *Pink Flamingos* asserts that this film is *The Queen*'s opposite, turning the culture of the beauty pageant on its head. Where Simon's film celebrates the appropriation of hyperfemininity for the purpose of 'passing' or 'realness' by drag queens, Waters offered the filthy flipside. Just as Divine literally eats shit at the end, *Pink Flamingos* offered something much less palatable to mainstream taste.

Divine, meanwhile, offered something less binary than a form of drag which currently dominates popular consciousness. There is nothing vulgar about the balls documented by Jennie Livingston in the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning* which in turn inspired the contemporary craze for the queen RuPaul and his televised 'drag race'. Of course, Divine was performing a form of 'femininity', just as all male drag queens do, but where many drag performers reify gendered stereotypes of how a woman should look and behave, Divine refused to play by the rules. The result was an anarchic gender melting pot who questioned the very nature of presentation.

I'll take a moment to address the use of pronouns here. I use he/him to refer to Divine the actor, sometimes credited by his birth name Harris Glenn Milstead, but she/her to refer to Divine the character (who is always assumed to be a woman in Waters' films). There's something beautifully fluid about the shifting of pronouns when referring to the different Divine personae, fluctuating between the two with the almost seamless fluidity he represented for gender presentation. All that being said, Divine made repeatedly clear that he was a man, and a proudly gay man at that, and so no question of sexual identity should be raised.

The culture within which Milstead created Divine was one of radical experimentation. After becoming estranged from his parents, the Dreamlanders, named for John Waters' company Dreamland Productions, became Divine's adopted family. They emerged from the underground queer scene of the 1960s just as psychedelic drugs like LSD were becoming available in the US. Starting with their first feature *Mondo Trasho* in 1969, the filmography that followed remains unmatched for its sheer experimentalism – not only of style, but of the mores upon which Western society was founded and sustained.

We can credit Waters and the Dreamlanders for obliterating taboos around certain acts – the comically graphic depictions of foot fetishism in films like *Mondo Trasho* and *Pink Flamingos* seem positively tame 50 years on (here's looking at you, Quentin Tarantino).

"When he isn't behaving like 'the filthiest person alive', Divine embodies an alternative standard of masculinity and femininity that can still exist within the realm of 'good taste'."

In other ways, popular discourse has moved backwards from where it was at the peak of Divine's career in the 1970s with films like 1974's *Female Trouble*, in which the extremes of good womanly behaviour are pushed to their dizzying limits. Rather than seeing queens like Divine as encouraging women's liberation from the oppressive expectations of heteronormative society, there are 'feminists' nowadays who would brand him a threat to biological essentialism.

Divine represents a radically anti-sexist idea of what it means to be a man or a woman. His performances opened up the potential for an array of gender presentations outside the limits of binary sex, using his platform to create a community in which gender could be questioned and played with while neglecting the need for fixed commitment. As theorist bell hooks wrote in her essay 'Is Paris Burning?', drag emerges "in a context where the notion of subjectivity is challenged, where identity is always perceived as capable of construction, invention, change." While hooks critiques the notion of 'realness' inherent to Livingston's documentary, her words echo the more iconoclastic approach to gender presentation embodied by Divine.

Consider by contrast the opening of Waters' 1981 film *Polyester*, in which Tab Hunter sings Debbie Harry's lyrics as we close on Divine dolling herself up like Elizabeth Taylor. The scene ends with her getting on the scales and kicking them aside – her weight doesn't matter, and as the line goes in 1988's *Hairspray*, she can be "big, blonde, and beautiful". Divine's femininity is more pronounced than in his earlier performances, simultaneously bringing Hollywood glamour to the dual image of fat male and female bodies. In addition to experimental ideas of gender, Divine offered more conventional beauty to those often sidelined or mocked in the movies.

A common misconception of the 1990 book 'Gender Trouble' by the theorist Judith Butler is that they argue that drag's proliferation could deconstruct dominant gender norms. Butler clarifies this in a chapter on *Paris Is Burning* in their 1996 work 'Bodies That Matter' by arguing that "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalisation and reidealisation of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms." Do films like *Polyester* and *Hairspray*, by moving away from Waters' earlier guerrilla style, undo this work of subversion and instead reinforce oppressive gendered structures?

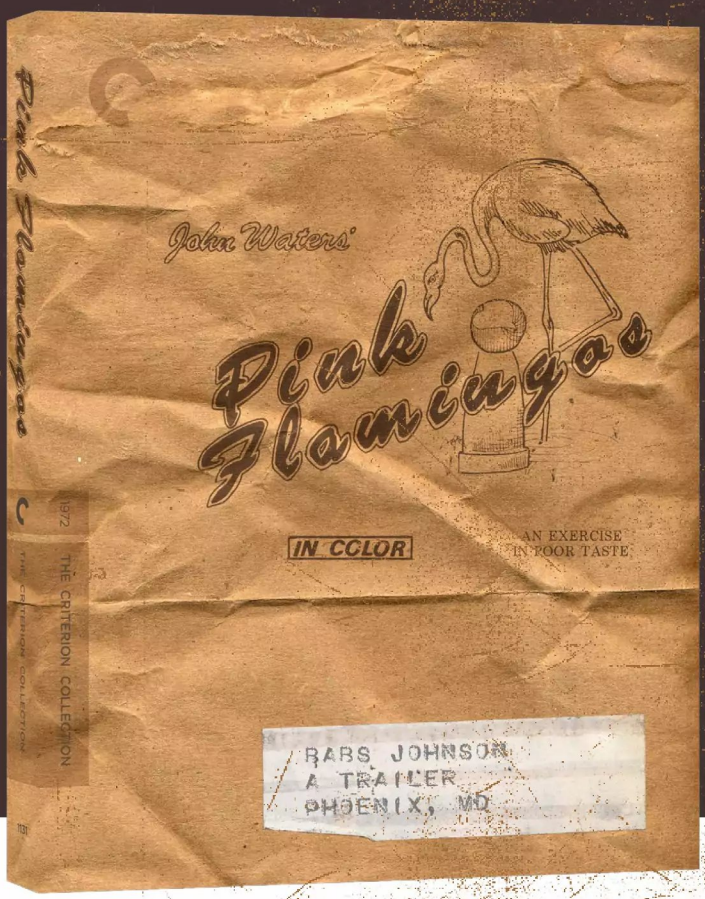
Unlike the limitations offered to hooks or Butler by the nature of beauty pageants and balls in films like *The Queen* and *Paris Is Burning*, Divine's film career offers a less restrictive case study for the potential of drag. When he isn't behaving like "the filthiest person alive," Divine embodies an alternative standard of masculinity and femininity that can still exist within the realm of 'good taste'. Yet the higher-budget, melodramatic style of Waters' projects in the 1980s wouldn't have been possible without the obliterative approach to convention of those earlier projects. At the end of *Pink Flamingos*, Divine tries and executes the Marbles, having proved herself to be filthier than them before skipping off into the sunset. After you've eaten dog shit and sucked off your son, there's not much further to go.

Fifty years later, it's the '80s version of Divine and her *Polyester* sheen that proves more controversial than the terroristic approach to gendered behaviour. The opening of *Multiple Maniacs* takes place at a freak show where the punters are told they can come and see "actual, real-life queers" as they jeer at two men making out in the ring. Queerness is acceptable when it's kept out of sight and mind of cisheteronormative society, confined to a caravan park on the outskirts of Baltimore. It's when the queer enters the home that moral panic follows, but Divine's varied performance gives hope that these spheres will continue to merge.

Divine's legacy is best summarised through the final lines he gives as Dawn Davenport in *Female Trouble*. Strapped to an electric chair, she thanks "all those wonderful people who were kind enough to read about me in the newspapers and watch me on the television news shows. Without all of you, my career could never have gotten this far. It was you that I murdered for and it is you that I will die for! Please remember, I love every fucking one of you!"

THE CRITERION COLLECTION

John Waters' Pink Flamingos is out to buy on Criterion Collection Blu-ray from Monday 25th July



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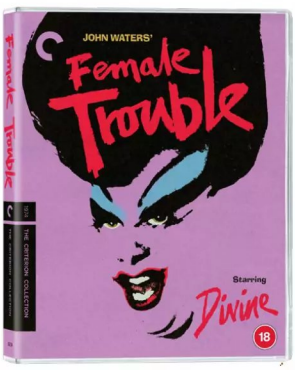

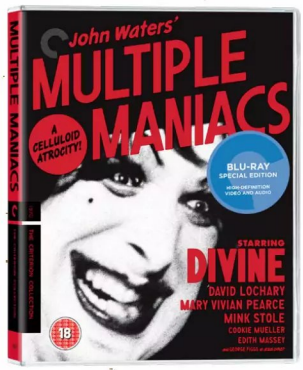

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Words by **SOMA GHOSH** *Illustration by* **WANDA DUFNER**

WHAT A SWIZZ!

Pink Flamingos *is a monolithic artwork which stands alone in the annals of 20th century culture. That's not to say that plenty of other filmmakers weren't taking notes.*

Picture a heist. An intimidatingly statuesque womxn, garbed in the white furs of an apres-ski socialite, raids a fashion museum. Electra Abundance, an LGBTQ+ house mother, walks tonight in a competition themed 'Royalty'. Her scurrying 'children', Black and Latina queers, rejected by homophobic America, fill garbage bags with the gowns of dead white aristocracy. "What should we take?" asks one. "Everything", Electra Abundance replies. Shattering the museum's doors, the pilot episode of hit TV drama *Pose* marries transgender crimes to feelgood pop.

In 1972, the wicked godmother to such gleefully gay on-screen felonies was hiding out in a pink trailer on the edgelands of Baltimore. In John Waters' cult comedy, *Pink Flamingos*, two families compete for the title of Filthiest People Alive. Drag queen Divine (Harris Glenn Milstead) plays Babs Johnson, a corpulent, semi-bald, beehived diva, made up like an evil clown. Babs, like Electra, performs walking sequences to pop music (with a shoplifted steak up her snatch). And Babs' climactic speech, delivered to journalists assembled to witness her commit murder, presages Electra's grab-'em-all attitude: "Kill everyone now!"

But Electra surrenders to the police, while Babs butchers and eats them. While *Pose* waggles its waxed disco pudenda, beseeching for acceptance, *Pink Flamingos*' hairy cunt (yes, there's one here, being forcibly IVF-ed), refuses to mollify the mainstream. Queers are not dears. "Filth is my life!" declares Divine. Oozing with blood and semen, Waters' D.I.Y hand grenade of proto-punk cinema has penetrated the sensibilities of directors like François Ozon and Pedro Almodóvar. Its camp filth disruption has allowed such diverse works as TV serial *Ozark*, Miranda July's 2020 feature *Kajillionaire* and Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* to flourish in its cultural blast. Yet in its satirising of family values, its LGBTQ+ clubland fiesta of the freakish and its celebration of female appetites, it remains unequalled.

Is it a good film? Not exactly. *Pink Flamingos* is an anti-film, a cut-up cabaret. Waters' disregard of his audience's or cast's well-being is evident in the chicken-torn flesh, the actors' breath misting the freezing trailer, the longueurs. He routs that premise of American cinema: to give folks a good time. Any time you start imagining that the 'plot' matters, Waters' goofy, carnival barker narration advertises its unseriousness. The sound seems to have been edited in a public toilet, while the narcoleptic camera zooms and snoozes. The film's greatest merit, if we might call it that, is Waters' commitment to a porno-chic aesthetic, partly resulting from Divine and the actor playing Raymond Marble, David Lochary, pillaging thrift stores.

Like Waters' famous moustache, a sweating, fake line of Maybelline eyeliner, he's drawing attention to the swizz of cinema, the pretence of pretending – later made explicit with 2000's *Cecil B. Demented*. This is the crummy back passage to truth that his more cinematically accomplished heirs cannot quite bring themselves to expose.

The shove Waters gives to the trailer trash stereotype has left indelible fingerprints. In the economically bumpy last decade, class war is back. *American Honey*, Andrea Arnold's road trip movie, blesses America's unwanted kids with a baptismal palette of honeyed golds and paradisical blues. It's an aesthetic that reappears in Sean Baker's *The Florida Project*,

a crushed-candy tale of motel life. Baker's gripping stories of trans sex work (*Tangerine*) and porno (*Red Rocket*) are drawn from John Waters territory. But his casting of real people, alongside the use of an iPhone to film *Tangerine*, showcases voyeurism as a means of compassion. This same edifying tilt sneaks into the plot twists of TV's *Ozark*, where a privileged couple, Jason Bateman and Laura Linney, scrabble for their criminal lives against a sharp-witted trailer girl Ruth (Julia Garner). In these contemporary works, the poor must be redeemed.

Pink Flamingos, by contrast, is as defiantly meatheaded as the bodiless turkey neck strung to flasher Raymond's dick. And Divine, wiggling her gargantuan booty to Little Richard's lubricious 'The Girl Can't Help It', is a call to rebellious, feminine self-pleasuring that subsequent frat boy 'eww' film moments of Judd Apatow and Todd Phillips can't touch. Pissing on the verge of a mini stately home, Divine relieves unconstrained female appetites. "Divine was my Jayne Mansfield," John Waters has said, "only put together with Godzilla."

Not that monstrous wrongness can't be chic: Waters has himself 'walked' for Comme de Garçons, been paid tribute by Prada and is currently modelling underwear for Calvin Klein. Divine has been honoured by fashion house Loewe; and reiterations of her bestial body rear up in the gleaming kitsch of Pedro Almodóvar and François Ozon's films, both of whom cite Waters as a vital influence.

While Almodòvar supposedly femme-centric, zingingly tinted, pop-cultural works share Waters' chaotic, self-indulgent and even boring vibes, he cannot escape his obsession with glossy magazine film-making. If cinema is a swizz, Almodóvar is in it up to his opera gloves. As a politically-conscious homosexual, Almodòvar is at his camp best when laying his gloss in service of critiquing national dross. In 2013's *I'm So Excited*, his fluffy aeroplane crash farce, he satirises – in splendid Catholic blues and matador reds – how a corrupt Spanish state and embezzling financiers are flying citizens in circles. Again, not exactly a great film, but Almodóvar's most whole-arsed defecation of sex and mescaline, in emulation of Waters' "dirtiness".

Radical erotic release drives Ozon's 1998 feature debut, *Sitcom*, a take on Waters' mainstream breakthrough, *Serial Mom*, starring Kathleen Turner. A white rat, brought into a wealthy suburban home, provokes a Watersesque familial descent into incest, homosexuality and rage. But the comedy flounders under Ozon's heavy touch. This is a perpetual problem for directors emulating Waters' DIY shiftlessness: can they give as little of a fuck?

Nonetheless, Ozon's gynaecological imagery, cannibalism, queer erotic doppelgängers and musicals – his career improving as he rollicks in genre trashbaggery – owe as much to Waters as Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock and Brian De Palma. He's an aesthetic hobo.

Bodily fluids seep through *Kajillionaire*, a comedy about a grifter family in earthquake-riddled LA The acid-washed colours, sour sunshine, criminal parents and queer love story carries *Pink Flamingo* overtones.

“*Parasite*, a gorgeous mah-jong box of a movie, might seem a world away from the anal prolapse of *Pink Flamingos*.”

Old Dolio (Evan Rachel Woods) has been used by her hippy parents (Debra Winger and Richard Jenkins) as a stooge since her birth, when they named her for a tramp whom they betted might give them a share of his lottery win. The whole family’s performance is piteously uncanny, a vermin plague of nervous tics suppressed beneath ill-fed pallor. Their trailer home, so to speak, is a condemned office, rented, cut-price, from a neighbouring soap magnate. Daily, it overflows with a hulk of pink foam, a visual burgeoning of the daughter’s homosexuality, untapped until her parents come onto a sexy stranger, Melanie (Gina Rodriguez) who is, instead, attracted to Old Dolio.

Again, despite inheriting Waters’ lens on queerness as a riot against the American family, July cleans it up. She’s too earnest to allow the trash to flow. The psychological damage from this shaky family structure is portentously emphasised by the earthquake metaphor. Like ovum-obsessed Edie, Old Dolio regresses to a baby, but her weirdness is given cause, and redemption.

Oscar-winning *Parasite*, a gorgeous mah-jong box of a movie, might seem a world away from the anal prolapse of *Pink Flamingos*’ filmic structure. Yet what Anthony Lane has identified as “the yuck factor” in Bong Joon Ho has been lubricated by Waters’ soiling of the American psyche. Bong’s massive cultural-crossover – including this tale of social revenge – owes a debt to Waters.

A loving, feckless family of grifters, the Kims, live below the gutter, at precisely piss level. Impersonating posh servants, their attempt to scam the wealthy Parks backfires in a bloodbath. Like the Marbles’ raped hitchhikers, an unexpected horror lurks in the basement of the Parks’ architect-designed home. A bottle-fed baby-man (like grandma Edie), is the human blob version of the GM-engineered pig in *Okja* and the pollution-bred gigantic tadpole in *The Host*. These overgrowths embody the social crimes of affluent Koreans in Bong’s other films. Yet, ultimately, Bong’s flashy visual poetics overwhelm any political heft. Sometimes, a fuck-you, spat on the fly, sticks more than a meticulously artistic construction.

There’s an interminable shot right at the mid-point of *Pink Flamingos* in which Babs’ trailer, set ablaze by filth rivals the Marbles, is seen crackling to its charred ribs and scored by what sounds like the crinkling of a crisp packet. Almost 50 years later, Bong built the Kims’ slum neighbourhood in a water tank, then flooded their home with sewage. What a stunt! Both directors razed their sets to the ground. Yet Bong’s perfect symphony of class war can’t quite touch Waters’ squawking cabaret for a realness so foul it creeps under the fingernails of your memory. As if you, too, had been there

The Curious Cinema of Alice in Wonderland

Introducing a new UK film and event season on the theme of curiosity – powered by Film Feels.

In Lewis Carroll's 1865 fantasy novel 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', a Caterpillar is seen puffing on a hookah. He tells Alice to take a bite of his mushroom, different sides of which have opposite effects. "One pill makes you larger / And one pill makes you small," opens Jefferson Airplane's song 'White Rabbit', which uses the famous Caterpillar scene to describe the different trips hallucinogens can take you on.

Modern readings of the story, plus the onset of meme culture, have led Alice to be seen as a metaphorical evocation of the effect that drugs can have on the human psyche. In the Wachowski sisters' 1999 film, *The Matrix*, awe-inspiring cyberwarrior Morpheus warns his new charge, Neo, that the trip he is about to take may not be easy, but it will expand his mind in ways he could not possibly imagine. Taking the blue pill will wake you up from the dream, whereas, "Take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

At every step of her journey, Alice remarks on the "queerness" of her situtation, or forgets her syntactical learnings and mutters, "curiouser and curiouser". But the trip itself isn't curiosity – that's Jefferson Airplane making listeners wonder what it's like to try LSD, or the mental force that draws Neo's hand to the red pill. Curiosity is what makes Alice follow the White Rabbit or push through the looking glass. Only then can we see what she found in the world beyond.

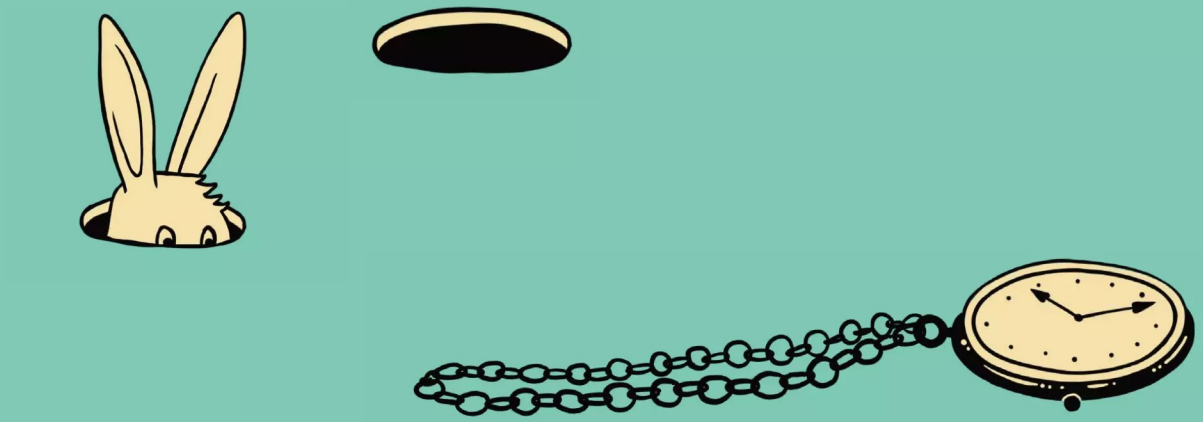
In summer 2022, Film Feels, a UK-wide cinema season supported by the National Lottery and BFI Film Audience Network, are inviting cinemas across the UK to programme films and events inspired by the theme of curiosity, and many titles are likely to contain the DNA – even in trace amounts – of Alice. The influence of Alice's curiosity on cinema is extensive. The first key aspect is technical innovation – of filmmakers reading her adventures and being curious to see if they can bring them to life.

Carroll himself was fascinated by magic lanterns and photography, but died five years before he was able to see Cecil M. Hepworth and Percy Stow's first film adaptation of his books in 1903, with the shortened title of *Alice in Wonderland*. In it, Alice changes size, the Cheshire Cat vanishes, and a baby transforms into a live piglet. What Carroll only saw in his mind, Hepworth and Stow first made a reality.

The adaptations of the Alice books represent a palimpsestic history of cinema as each version develops the reality of its hallucinations through the development of visual effects. Edwin S. Porter's 1910 film adds a back-projection rabbit hole and celluloid superimposition, while the 1931 and 1933 features by Bud Pollard and Norman Z. McLeod add spoken dialogue, two-dimensional animation and advanced prosthetics. Each time Wonderland expands, it retains the early tricks of transformation while adding parts of the story that others had to leave behind.

Another influence Alice has had on cinema is in the restoration of childlike wonder to an adult audience. Pollard's 1931 version opens with a song by Irving Berlin: "Come along if you care / We'll take you there / You must prepare / To be a kiddie like you were

Words by **LILLIAN CRAWFORD** *Illustration by* **LAURÈNE BOGLIO**



when you read / Of the girl who was sitting by the fire with her kitten / In the story that was written long ago." An invitation – or rather, an invocation – just like offers of pills or mushrooms. Berlin echoes the Mock Turtle's song about the Lobster Quadrille: "Will you come and join the dance?"

The return to childhood is what initially brought Walt Disney to Carroll's books, spending decades trying to find the best way to adapt the stories at his animation studio. One of Disney's earliest films was 1923's *Alice's Wonderland* which launched his series of 'Alice Shorts' in which a live-action Virginia Davis was cast into an animated environment. Other than a Mickey Mouse cartoon in 1936 called Thru The Mirror, Disney swayed between proposals for his feature Alice project, rejecting a script by Aldous Huxley as "too literary" as well as a Surrealist vision by Salvador Dalí.

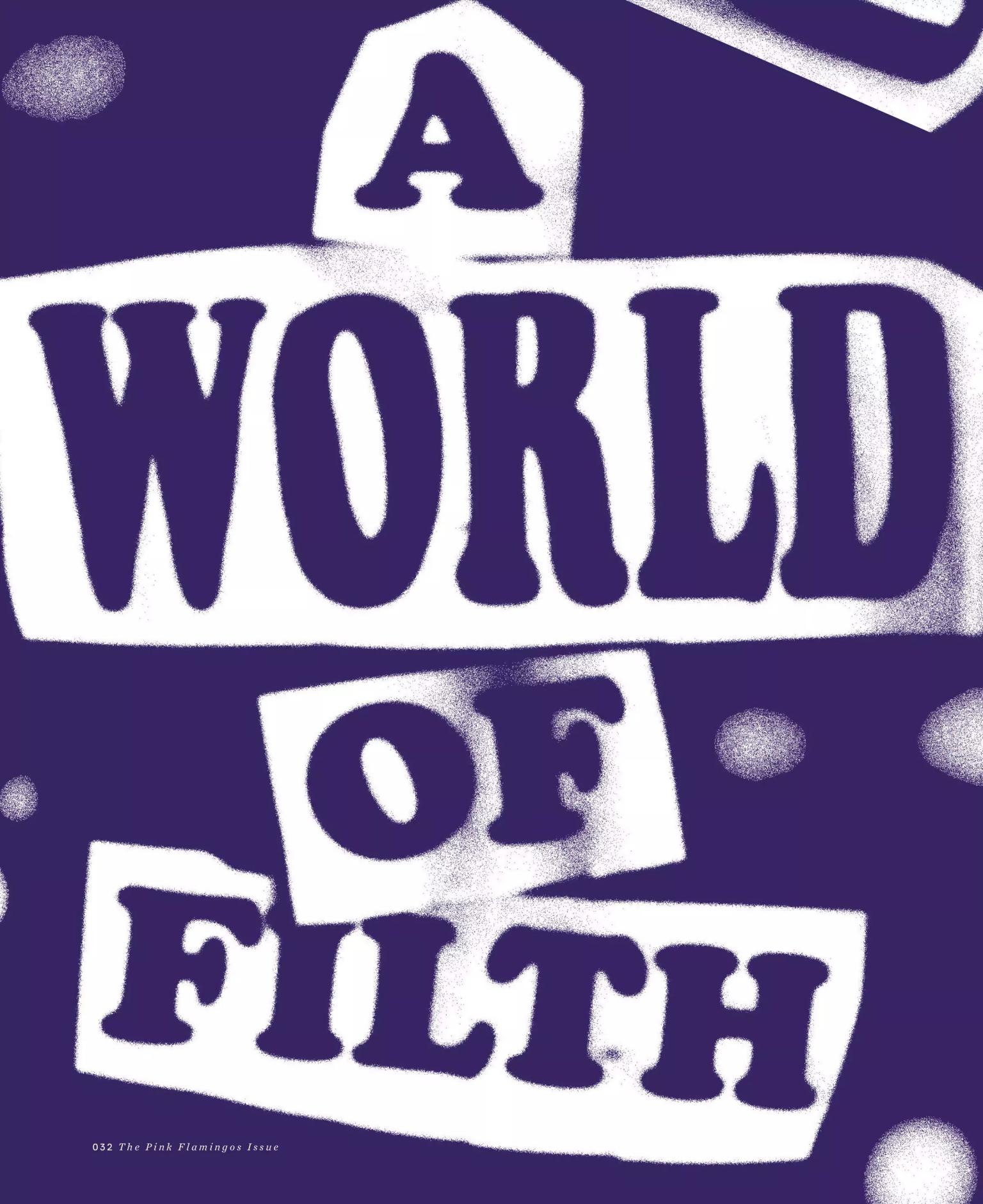
The feature film Disney finally completed in 1951 centred on the concept designs of Mary Blair, inspired by a trip to South America. Blair created a vibrant, psychedelic vision of Wonderland which continues to dominate popular interpretation despite several later adaptations. The bright colours of the Disney film are more palatable, for example, than the horrifying stop-motion creatures created by Jan Švankmajer for *Alice* (1988), featuring real animal skulls and dead-eyed dolls, even though this latter version better taps into Carroll's more nightmarish side.

The theme of curiosity, like Alice, manages to open many locked doors of the mind, and the Film Feels season will likely take in many in-direct adaptations of the text. Alice's curiosity has inspired cinematic explorations of blossoming female sexuality, as seen in Bud Townsend's 1976 porn parody *Alice in Wonderland: An X-Rated Musical Fantasy* which turns the Wonderland inhabitants into erotic educators to a virginal Alice, with Humpty Dumpty inviting her to fix his broken penis and the Red Queen demanding she gives her head.

More subtle are the psychosexual dramas of 1970s French directors like Claude Chabrol, who crafts a Lacanian looking glass for Alice to perceive her sexed self in *Alice or the Last Escapade* (1977), and Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974) where the title women's sapphic journey begins with a White Rabbit chase through Paris.

While Carroll's stories have influenced cinema throughout its history, the message has also been one of curiosity – be that of the mind, like the red pill in The Matrix, or as the 'Drink Me' poppers represent in Townsend's *X-Rated Musical Fantasy*, the body. As long as filmmakers remain as curious as Alice, cinema will continue to delve deeper down the rabbit hole.

Film Feels Curious is a summer long, UK-wide cinema season supported by the National Lottery and BFI Film Audience Network. Explore all films and events at filmfeels.co.uk


A
WORLD
OF
FILTH

Words by **KATHERINE MCLAUGHLIN** *Title type design by* **EMMA BALEBELA**

A WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP TOURNAMENT OF SICKO AUTEURS

It's easy to be offensive and sink to base humour in the name of art, but to do it with panache is where the real genius of filthy filmmaking lies. The name most synonymous with filth is, of course, our man John Waters, whose urge to cackle in the face of good taste is commendable, and who has been quoted as saying, "If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation."

What follows is a journey through the most bleurgh-inducing cinematic alchemists – those audacious filmmakers who have been committed to pushing the limits of bad taste and crushing taboos with the heel of their boot. Most have the canny ability of pissing off the censors, some have been accepted by the mainstream, but all of them have taken big risks in the name of filth.

At the heart of this kind of cinema lies curiosity, a thirst for originality and the admirable urge to challenge expectations and the status quo. Sometimes that desire leads a filmmaker to peek under the bonnet of dark fantasies and to live them out via excessively violent, erotic or graphic imagery. For others in this competition, it's that combination of pitch-black humour and gross out antics that makes their oeuvre stand out – the ability to go that one step too far so the audience is left gasping in disbelief or, if possible, walking out in disgust.

Often, it is the merging of the personal and political that compels a director to spit in the face of good taste; a stand against traditional values, a puritanical authority or bigoted attitudes. Ultimately watching filth offers a liberating high, and the filmmakers who have dared to be authentic and candid when crossing the line are the ones I have chosen celebrate.

JOHN WATERS	Baltimore's pioneer of filth filmmaking, a counterculture icon and director of the notorious *Pink Flamingos*.
JIM HOSKING	British pervert responsible for *The Greasy Strangler* hasn't yet topped the grotesquery of his first feature.
THE FARRELLY BROTHERS	With *Dumb and Dumber* these American bros cemented their title as kings of the '90s gross out comedy.
TOM SIX	Depraved Dutch director of *The Human Centipede* trilogy and the controversial *The Onania Club*.
DAVID CRONENBERG	Canada's celebrated master of venereal and body horror, and the man behind the iconic *Videodrome*.
JULIA DUCOURNAU	Audacious *enfant terrible* who has shocked audiences with the equally visceral and violent *Titane* and *Raw*.
JIYOUNG LEE	The irreverent and confrontational Asian-American indie filmmaker behind playful feminist sleaze *Female Pervert*.
THE SOSKA SISTERS	Canadian twisted twins who plumbed the bloody depths of revenge fantasy and body modification in *American Mary*.
TODD SOLONDZ	The taboo busting American satirist behind *Happiness* and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.
JÖRG BUTTGEREIT	Underground German protest filmmaker whose controversial 1987 necrophilia flick *Nekromantik* was banned across the world.
TAKASHI MIIKE	Prolific Japanese sicko director behind the indelible *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*.
JOCELYN DEBOER AND DAWN LUEBBE	Comedy duo polarised audiences with their weirdo suburban satire debut *Greener Grass*.
SHIN'YA TSUKAMOTO	The ground-breaking *Tetsuo: the Iron Man* put this fiercely independent Japanese filmmaker on the global map.
JOVANKA VUCKOVIC	Fearless feminist director of *Riot Girls* and mastermind behind the first all-female horror anthology flick *XX*.
GASPAR NOÉ	French-Argentine provocateur and enfant terrible of New French Extremity, his wildly experimental oeuvre includes *Irreversible* and *Climax*.
JEFF TREMAINE	The *Jackass* director merges dick jokes and extreme gross-out with relentless fervour and across four hit films.

JOHN WATERS

Pink Flamingos boasts not only a controversial chicken-fucking scene but also the most vomit-inducing image ever committed to film when leading lady Divine chomps down on real poop.

TOM SIX

According to Six, *The Human Centipede* is 100 per cent medically accurate, with the surgically conjoined trio of humans feeding through a protracted alimentary canal, but none of the actors are eating real shit.

DAVID CRONENBERG

Innovative in his approach to aggressive sexuality from the start of his career with films like *Rabid* and *Shivers*, Cronenberg has crafted some of the most explicit and disturbing imagery in modern cinema.

THE SOSKA SISTERS

Jen and Sylvia have emulated Cronenberg throughout their career, even boldly remaking *Rabid* in his honour. Mutating similar themes with gooey and bloody effects the twins never shy away from grisly horror.

JORG BUTTGEREIT

Despite *Nekromantik* explicitly showing bleeding cum, prosthetic dicks and sex with corpses, Buttgereit shoots it all so artfully that it borders on the deliriously romantic at points. It's actually kind of sweet.

TAKASHI MIIKE

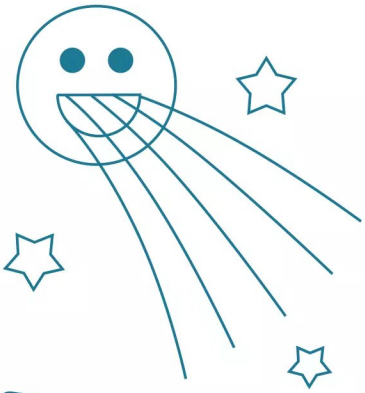
It's difficult to compete with Miike's fertile and fucked up imagination. With a career spanning over 100 films, there's nothing he hasn't courted controversy for with his shocking depiction of sex and violence.

SHIN'YA TSUKAMOTO

Snake of June, *Tokyo Fist* and the *Tetsuo* trilogy really get to the heart of sexual power struggles, phallic obsession (giant rotating drill penis!) and human pain with imaginatively violent gusto.

GASPAR NOÉ

Noé has constantly presented the audience with sick imagery. Even his worst efforts feature something exhilaratingly dirty; the unstimulated sex scenes in *Love* climax with a 3D cum shot straight at the lens.



DING DING DING!

WINNER!

JOHN WATERS

John Waters prides himself on creating pure filth. His devotion to the art form has infiltrated the minds of many filmmakers working today but none have ever matched his daring, DIY approach in the same way. It's a singular director who can hold on to the crown of filth for over 50 years but from his early shorts from the mid-'60s to his final film *A Dirty Shame*, his irreverent humour makes the sleaze sing.

JOHN WATERS

William S Burroughs dubbed Waters the 'Pope of Trash'. A much-deserved epithet after his strongest period of obscene material in the 1970s and '80s. Such is Waters dedication to filth, he refused to compromise for a modern audience and stopped making films in 2004. From his early days of bawdy sleaze to his satirical takes on modern art in *Pecker* and independent filmmaking in *Cecil B. Demented* his rebellious attitude shines bright like a polished turd in every film.

TAKASHI MIIKE

As you'll have seen, Miike has his sicko credentials down pat with all the bodily fluids and limb-lopping. Yet maybe the thing that causes him to stumble on that final hurdle is his occasional reliance on The Man, and his odd foray into conventional genre pictures that bare little sign of his madballs spirit. In this game, we're looking for someone who's got their freak flag flying 24/7. John Waters commits to the bit.

JOHN WATERS

With *Polyester*, John Waters took filth to a whole new level employing gimmickry and the invention of the Odorama cinema experience – scratch-and-sniff cards that pranked the audience with gross smells including skunk spray and farts. His dedication to shock and laughter distils the very essence of filth.

DAVID CRONENBERG

With his adaptation of JG Ballard's scandalous novel 'Crash', Cronenberg sparked controversy, an *Evening Standard* headline claiming that this was "A Movie Beyond Depravity," and attacks from the *Daily Mail* (a badge of honour). There is so much deviant sex in this film it's bound to turn you on at some point.

TAKASHI MIIKE

2001 was an exciting year for Miike. The Toronto Film Festival screening of the relentlessly violent *Ichi the Killer* was accompanied by vomit bags and it was the same year he released the jaw dropping *Visitor Q* where hardly any taboo (it opens with incest) was off limits...

GASPAR NOÉ

Always striving to push the medium of cinema to new places, Noe has revelled in shocking audiences with sexual intercourse shown from inside the vagina in *Enter the Void* and utilising a warning title card before the disturbing finale of *Seul Contre Tous*. It's immersive, but there's nothing literally stinking up the place.

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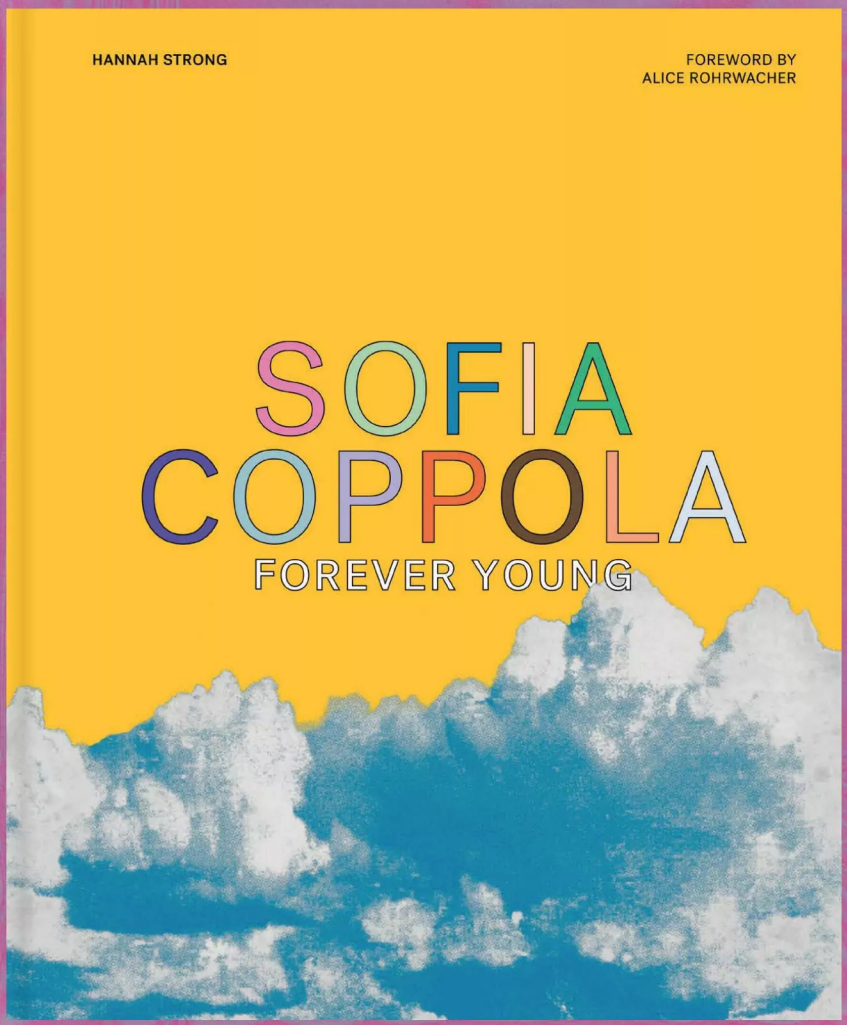

ABRAMS

Little White Lies

MEET THE AUTHOR

Hannah Strong is the author of 'Sofia Coppola: Forever Young' published by Abrams New York and on sale at all good booksellers now. We met Hannah at her favourite table at the Chateau Marmont to talk about the writing process, Sofia's cinema and who's better out of Stephen Dorff and Bill Murray.

LWLies: What was the first thing you wrote for the book, and did it make it to the final text?

Strong: It was the first sentence of what was then *The Virgin Suicides* chapter: "The first time I wanted to kill myself I was thirteen years old." It did make it to print, but it's now the first line of the introduction. I think it's got more of an impact that way!

Which of Sofia Coppola's films did you discover the most about via the writing and research process?

Probably *The Bling Ring*, which wasn't really a film I loved when I started on the book. I finally understood what Sofia was aiming for with it – the whole "aesthetic of blandness" that I talk about in that chapter. I think working on it during lockdown helped too as I really understood the pervasive feeling of isolation which hangs over the characters, who form a parasocial connection with celebrities via social media due to their real life loneliness.

Sofia Coppola is a creative multi-hyphenate – what is your favourite non-film work she has produced?

Definitely *Hi Octane*, her short-lived Comedy Central magazine show from 1994. Where else can you see Martin Scorsese being asked who his favourite Beastie Boy is, or Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth hosting an interview segment called 'Thurston's Alley'? Sofia was ahead of her time.

What is your all-time canon performance in a Sofia film?

Stephen Dorff in *Somewhere*. It's such a brilliantly calibrated depiction of Hollywood ennui, and in a more just world would have been an awards contender. Johnny Marco is a fascinating character to me as it was Sofia's second focus on a male protagonist after *Lost in Translation*, and while there are similarities between Bob Harris and Marco in that they're both actors struggling with their emotional detachment from the world around them, I think Dorff's performance is so subtle it's got the edge for me. Of course I could wax lyrical about Kirsten Dunst and Sofia forever, but you'll have to buy the book for that.

Would you get a Sofia tattoo? If so, what would it be, and where would it be on your body?

I already have one! I got it when I finished the book. It's of Elle Fanning as Cleo in *Somewhere*, which is my favourite Sofia film. I absolutely adore the ice skating scene, which is set to Gwen Stefani's 'Cool', so I commissioned a minimalist sketch of her in that scene and I got it on my arm about a week after we went to press

'Sofia Coppola: Forever Young' is on sale now

Illustration by **ALICE CARNEGIE** *Title type design by* **EMMA BALEBELA**

MAGUL

A SPECIAL DOSSIER

Five stories about the alternative face of movie blockbusters from around the globe. From subversive sleeper hits in the Philippines to sixties smut to Greek weddings that are both big and fat, these are all tales about films made with modest intentions that nevertheless connected with an audience far wider than expected.

WORDS BY SAM MOORE

1. HELLO BEAUTIFUL

Is Brian de Palma's *Mission to Mars* the greatest blockbust inspired by a theme park ride?

When thinking of theme park attractions adapted into films, most minds usually wander over to Disney's global phenomenon *Pirates of the Caribbean* or more recently the Dwayne Johnson vehicle *Jungle Cruise*. But before Jack Sparrow made Johnny Depp a megastar, and long before the days of corporate hegemony mining the vaults for every little bit of potentially valuable intellectual property (the year 2000), Brian De Palma made *Mission to Mars*.

The film was based on the forgotten Disneyland ride of the same name which took guests on a simulated trip to Mars via an auditorium encircled with cinema screens and seats designed to mimic the rumble of riding to space. Often dismissed as an icy cynic, De Palma had earlier flirted with blockbuster filmmaking with 1996's *Mission: Impossible*, where he was able to throw every split-diopter, POV angle and tracking shot at the screen, but on the face of it, it did not make him a prime candidate to lead a sci-fi tentpole for the House of Mouse. As they say, it looked like "one for them" after its relative financial failure and production issues that 1998's beleaguered *Snake Eyes*. However, it's clear from the opening scene, with its intrusive high angle view of an all-American barbecue, that this is Brian De Palma's world and it's a place that bears little resemblance to any joyous experience.

Broadly speaking, the film is an adventure yarn about a group of astronauts journeying to Mars to rescue a colleague who had been sent to the red planet to investigate the possibility of establishing a human colony. De Palma, the junior master of suspense, bleeds the mission for every drop of drama – both human and extraterrestrial – through his full range of visual inventiveness. A slightly rough mess of pulpy sci-fi genre fiction – complete with exploding heads – and an existential treatise on love, life and loss, *Mission to Mars* is not *Pirates* or *Jungle Cruise* or *Tomorrowland* or *The Haunted Mansion*.

It's easier to see the parallels with a film like *2001: A Space Odyssey* but *Mission to Mars* is a pivot away from the staunchness of Kubrick's epic and far less interested in science and evolution. De Palma's movie, for all its space vortex spectacle and freezingly tense set pieces – particularly one wrenching spacewalk that climaxes with a heart-breaking act of sacrifice – is all about humans and our connections to one another.

Don Cheadle's astronaut has been abandoned on Mars for over a year and is found in a state of delirium, angered to the extreme by NASA's disregard for his wellbeing and only brought back to calm when reminded of his time at home, reading stories to his son. It's a moment of real sadness, a reminder that even when pushing to the greater limits of the universe, taking steps where no man or woman have gone before, all that matters is the connections we share with the ones we love. What is all the daring, all the exploration, all the invention of mind, body and science for, if not to share with someone else?

It's a thematic moment the film revisits at its climax when Gary Sinise's Jim, fully encompassed by the grief of losing his wife, is offered hope that there is something far greater than our known universe. He's offered a suicidal ticket from aliens to an unknown future on a faraway planet. As he takes the hand of the alien, it's impossible not to remember the words spoken by his deceased wife earlier in the film: "The universe is not chaos, it's connection. Life reaches out for life."

They're ideas that would later be explored in blockbuster films such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* and Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* but a film of this scale, that is so idiosyncratic, so big in scale and theme, seems completely revolutionary in the film landscape of 2022. It's the type of merger of art and commerce that was once paramount to the functioning of the movie business and built careers for grand artists like Spielberg, Lucas and Coppola. *Mission to Mars* may have flopped and been long forgotten but it remains a signifier of what a great filmmaker can do even with material as banal as a theme park ride

WORDS BY ANNA SWANSON

2. A WEDDING GIFT

On the audience-gratifying power of rom-com box office titan, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

Here's a fun piece of trivia: what's the most successful romantic comedy of all time? While instinct might lead you to pick a Richard Curtis film out of a hat, the actual answer is an olive oil-drenched indie co-written by and starring a then-unknown Canadian actress. It is, of course, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Adapted from a semi-autobiographical script from writer and star Nia Vardalos, the Joel Zwick-directed film spun a $5 million budget into a $368 million worldwide gross. The unprecedented success of this sleeper hit seems like something akin to catching lightning in a bottle. However, considering that the film's short-lived TV series and its 2016 sequel both failed to attract a comparable viewership or critical reception, one might assume that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was more of a flash in the pan than a revolution in comedy.

The two truths that have to be reconciled are that everyone and their mother (and their fifteen aunts) saw this movie, and yet the film's legacy has been diminishing returns. The spark that struck cinemas in 2002 burned bright, but faded quickly. So, is that the lesson of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? That sometimes you get lucky and your movie manages to rake in cash while not being particularly memorable. Perhaps for the cynics among us. But the reality of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*'s journey to record-breaking success is far too interesting to simply call it luck. As the title would suggest, the film offers an eccentric spin on the boy-meets-girl rom-com trope. The girl is Toula (Vardalos), an unmarried daughter of Greek immigrants with aspirations beyond working at the family restaurant for the rest of her life. The boy is Ian (John Corbett), a WASP-y dreamboat of an English teacher who, much to Toula's father's chagrin, is not at all Greek.

But cultural differences be damned! Toula and Ian are determined to make it work. After plentiful familial hijinks, some confusion over the tenets of vegetarianism, and a little compromise, the two get hitched. On the surface, it sounds like the kind of silly and sweet rom-com that we've all seen on the back of a plane seat a dozen times. But the exact reason *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* exists is that this film hadn't been done before.

Vardalos wrote *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as a screenplay, then adapted it into a one-woman show which garnered the attention of producers Rita Wilson and Tom Hanks. Eventually, she turned it back into a screenplay, with her motivation deriving from the frustration of repeatedly striking out as an actress because, according to her agent, there simply weren't any roles out there for her. She's not a visible minority, but she also doesn't have a conventional "European" look. No one was looking to cast for Greek roles. So Vardalos wrote her own. The film isn't strictly biographical. Details were changed, including a location swap from Vardalos' hometown of Winnipeg to Chicago. But there's a palpable sense of fidelity that permeates the film. Even with the tense family dynamics driving the conflict of the plot, Vardalos never loses sight of the film's affection for its characters. They are eccentric, frustrating and stubborn, but they're family.

Despite the setting of Chicago, a great deal of it was filmed in Toronto, taking advantage of the city's abundant Greek neighbourhoods and retaining the Canadian-ness of Vardalos' experiences. While Vardalos' Greek heritage is certainly the most vital aspect of the film, her Canadian background is significant too. Toronto is often used for filming movies set in American cities, fading into the background, only to be recognized by those that truly know the ins and outs of the city. Try finding a more apt metaphor for Canadian talent.

Vardalos – like many of those who hail from above the 49th parallel – saw Hollywood as her best chance to make it in the movies. It ended up being a pretty good choice. She mounted her one-woman show in Los Angeles and American producers were necessary to bring the film to life. But the retention of Vardalos' Canadian background endeared her film to audiences in her home country. There's no greater joy for a Canadian than recognizing Canada on film or pointing out that an actor is Canadian.

The film was initially a limited release that first targeted Greek communities as the primary viewership (Vardalos marketed her stage show directly to the patrons of Greek Orthodox churches). But it didn't take long for word to spread. The film might not have been playing on every screen, but it was packing the house where it did play. It never secured the number one spot at the US box office, but it played in cinemas for a full year. People returned to it, bringing friends and family to share in the communal joy. All in all, with the help of a steady viewership, it became the fifth highest grossing film of the year. Suffice to say, the film was a bigger hit than anyone expected. While the film's cultural specificity made it feel personal to Greek audiences (or, really, anyone from a big family), there's more to its relatability than just niche jokes about Windex and odd-ball relatives. One of the keys to this is the film's dual fish out of water narratives.

Early in the film we see how Toula has spent her life feeling out of place. She didn't fit in with the girls at school, she grew up to work at her family's business and, until meeting Ian, she spent most of her adult life in the shadow of her sister who married young and had three kids. Anyone with a large, immigrant family can surely see their own experiences in Toula's jealousy towards the other girls at school, with their Wonder Bread sandwiches and cookie-cutter families. Toula's eventual acceptance of her family's peculiarities is heartfelt and certainly rings true.

The other side of the coin is Ian's experience. He's an all-American guy, but he's an outsider in Toula's circle. He finds a learning curve in adapting to Greek customs. There's a great deal of comedic potential to be mined here and the film does so brilliantly. But by portraying Ian as someone just as out of place as Toula has always felt, the film offers relatability to anyone watching, whether they have a dozen cousins named Nick, or come from a long line of only children.

The cynical version of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*'s success is that its cultural ties gave it a built in audience and some luck pushed it to record-breaking status. In support of this reading there's the failure of the TV show, the sequel, and Vardalos' 2009 Greece-set rom-com *My Life in Ruins*, an original movie, but one clearly capitalizing on her earlier success. Whatever it was that made *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* such a phenomenon couldn't be recreated.

But perhaps the exact problem that has plagued these subsequent ventures is what led to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*'s success. The 2002 film wasn't trying to recreate anything, it was trying to do what hadn't been done. Vardalos' own agent told her there were no roles for someone that looked like her or shared her heritage. Rather than try to fit in with what already existed, she created something new. My Big Fat Greek Wedding became a smash hit because Vardalos fought to put something original into the rom-com landscape and this resonated with viewers. There's no formula for originality. That's why the film worked so well. That's why it can't be done again

WORDS BY MARK HANSON

3. ROCKY ROADS

On the Indonesian mockbuster maven who's doll-based rip-offs are superior to the originals.

Rocky Soraya's Indonesian 2016 horror film *The Doll* begins with a similarly staged riff to the cold open of James Wan's *The Conjuring* from 2013. Sitting together on a couch, a trio of young people recount the supernatural troubles they've experienced in their home since taking in an unquestionably creepy-looking doll (frazzled blonde pigtails, burnt out eye sockets). This tale is shown to us through a series of flashbacks in which things go bump in the night, childish handwritten notes about playing hide and seek appear, and the youngest of the group is viciously attacked by an unseen force. It is addressed to an intrepid duo of paranormal investigators. "Maybe you can help us," the eldest girl eventually pleads.

Released in the days before Halloween, *The Doll* was a homegrown hit. And so Soraya – a budding producer and director who founded the genre-leaning production house Hitmaker Studios a few years prior – subsequently proceeded to construct a de facto Conjuring Universe for the Indonesian market. *The Doll 2* and its spin-off, *Sabrina* (thick black mane, subtly shifting eyes, devious grin), quickly followed, as well as two films in the spiritually-linked *The 3rd Eye* series, each setting new local box office records along the way. Throughout, the guiding influence of prevailing horror titan James Wan is concretely apparent.

In *The Doll* series, ghost hunter Laras (played by Sara Wijayanto, an actual Indonesian celebrity paranormal investigator) acts as the connective thread. She becomes the proxy for *The Conjuring*'s lead couple, Ed and Lorraine Warren, with her own long history of case files and an almost identical home storage room full of once-possessed items. Alongside a revolving door of supernaturally attuned partners, she confronts a smorgasbord of interconnected hauntings that have plagued seemingly ordinary families and all stem from a procession of unholy, *Annabelle*-esque dolls. Meanwhile, in *The 3rd Eye* films, which follow a separate narrative about two sisters with the power to see into the spirit world, Wan's Insidious series looms as an aesthetic inspiration in Soraya's visualization of a phantasmic purgatorial space not unlike the idea of "The Further".

The horror genre has always thrived on brazen low-grade copycats. Throughout the Euroshlock glory days of the past, storied producer Ovidio G Assonitis mounted tawdry cash-ins like 1974's blatant *Exorcist* rip-off, *Beyond the Door*, while Z-grade maestros Claudio Fragasso and Bruno Mattei cranked out unofficial and wildly incoherent "sequels" to Hollywood genre franchises. (See their 1990 collaboration *Night Killer*, a slasher flick marketed in Italy as the third *Texas Chain-saw Massacre* entry but which features a villain who wears a Freddy Krueger mask.) Nowadays, that torch has been passed on to the likes of much-litigated "mockbuster" outfit The Asylum (of *Sharknado* and *Titanic II* fame) or the UK's North Bank Entertainment, whose charmingly cut-rate *Robert the Doll* adventures directly channel *Child's Play* and *Puppet Master* for a new generation of streaming audiences.

But Soraya comes from a rich film lineage himself. His father, Raam Soraya, helped cement Indonesian horror cinema in the 1980s, producing several films starring legendary scream queen Suzzanna. As a film artist, Soraya isn't simply making pale imitations of flashier source material. Rather, he takes the boilerplate scare elements of Wan's franchises to unbridled and enthusiastic new levels of excess.

For one, the demons in Soraya's films wreak havoc in shockingly ruthless fashion. After a few teasing games, they eventually possess and transform characters into bloodthirsty maniacs, lunging after their prey with arms crazily outstretched. The visceral damage they end up inflicting on others, including their host body, provides numerous flinch-worthy moments in each film, with knives, garden shears, and buzzsaws among the objects regularly employed for maximum grisliness. In one especially disturbing sequence from *The Doll*, an unfortunate soul first gets their hand pulled into a running garburator before being possessed into repeatedly throwing themselves face-first from the top floor ledge of their home onto the hard porcelain floor below.

Far from mindless gore shows though, the brutality on display is consistently positioned as a result of real-world class tensions. Soraya compellingly engages with his country's pervasive state of economic depression through narratives that hinge on secrets involving a central character's prior participation in a desperate act of violence. Tragically-botched robberies and other treacherous

schemes undertaken by poverty-stricken individuals serve as the ground from which undead karmic retribution bubbles up. Soraya's viewpoint is undoubtedly coloured by his own affluent background – he appears to show empathy for the dire conditions of his underprivileged characters but then is also quick to dole out savage punishment when they're pushed to transgress – but the films still allow ample room to reflect on an ever-more urgent wealth divide problem.

Due to their intriguing thematic preoccupations and predilection for creatively mounted carnage, Soraya's films ultimately transcend their inspirations, particularly as The Conjuring Universe has become suffocated by an air of dull stateliness in the wake of Wan retreating into more of an absent producer role. Soraya, on the other hand, has remained steadfastly committed to the horror enterprise he initiated, remaining in the director's chair throughout and consciously upping the stakes in both form and content with each film.

And after an extended pandemic-related hiatus, the long-awaited *The Doll 3* finally hits Indonesian screens in 2022. The film's social media accounts are currently posting images of billboards adorning the streets of various Indonesian cities, featuring a brand-new evil doll (red hair, plaid shirt, strong Chucky vibes) to terrorize your dreams. With the rest of Soraya's previous instalments readily available on Netflix, horror fans throughout the rest of the world should also take notice

WORDS BY PURPLE ROMERO

4. SUBVERSIVE SWEETHEARTS

Dissecting the Philippine rom-com mega-hit that craftily broke the genre mould.

The highest-grossing film of all time in the Philippines to date, 2019's *Hello, Love, Goodbye*, has all the makings of a typical romantic comedy: it has a tried-and-tested boy-meets-girl storyline; stars two of the most sought-after actors from the the country's biggest broadcasting networks, and was produced by a top film studio, Star Cinema. And it is, for all intent and purpose, a traditional rom-com. Though the film's alignment to this typically lightweight genre made it more effective in blossoming into a subversive migrant melodrama.

Hello, Love, Goodbye tells the story of Joy Fabregas, a woman who completes a nursing degree in the Philippines but has to settle for working as a domestic helper in Hong Kong to provide for her family. Portrayed by Kathryn Bernardo, arguably one of the biggest female movie idols in the Philippines, Joy's life mirrors the intergenerational trajectory of becoming a domestic worker. Her mother was a domestic worker, and thus, she becomes one too. She meets Ethan Del Rosario, played by Alden Richards, a Filipino bartender, in the sprawling city, and from there their love story begins. While this is a very typical rom-com, this is not, however, your typical OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) film, a genre which delved into and dissected the lives of Filipino migrant workers. It can, indeed, be seen as an evolution of this localised sub-genre, a much-needed charting of a new direction of filmic discourse for this theme.

Prior to *Hello, Love, Goodbye*, which broke box office records in 2019 by grossing $17.4 million nationwide,

dethroning another Bernardo-top billed rom-com in 2018, *The How's of Us*, as the highest-grossing local film of all time, mainstream OFW films have depicted migrant workers the way the Philippine government has branded them: as modern heroes who toiled hard and sacrificed their lives for their families. It's a visual motif which romanticised the plight of Filipino workers abroad, especially those in blue-collar jobs. These are the values that, supposedly, Filipinos should be known for: they do everything for their families, they do their best to help the economy through the remittances they send back, these are the roles they inevitably must fulfil, the quintessential goals they must go for.

This discourse, however, often gives the state a free pass and a way out from being held accountable for its failure to create economic opportunities for its own citizens. By magnifying the filial aspect of migrant melodrama, these films remove the audience's attention from the role of the state and instead perpetuates a narrative template that was introduced at the time the labour export program was implemented in 1974, under then President Ferdinand Marcos.

Hello, Love, Goodbye, does something different, as the female protagonist tries to break away from this "modern hero" branding by telling herself that being a domestic worker is just like Hong Kong, a place of transit, a bridge to other fates and possibilities. She is not destined to be a domestic worker forever, it is just a transient phase of her life, a springboard for her to accomplish another, bigger personal dream.

A female migrant worker who dares to have an identity beyond what is imposed on her by the government and by her responsibilities to her family? A Filipina who takes back her narrative? This deviation is the very kind of subversion that mainstream Philippine cinema needs and finally got in *Hello, Love, Goodbye*.

What marked this film as brave and different is the fact that the leading lady here gets to love and be intimate with someone on her own terms. It is not Ethan who gets to tell her what to do, where to go or what to think. It acknowledges the reality that female migrant workers, too, experience the very human urge and need for sex, a topic which mainstream OFW films dare not discuss. A woman can cry and gnash her teeth in loneliness when she is working abroad and the audience will sympathize with her, but for her to crave for a good fuck is a reality that Filipinos would either prefer to gloss over or merely not talk about openly. So, for it to be captured in a mainstream romcom sends the message that yes, this happens and that yes, there's nothing wrong with it.

Last but not least, the film could indeed be a love story, but it's a love story where Joy chooses herself over the predictable happy ending of staying together with a man. Ethan tries to guilt-trip her by saying love should mean being with him instead of leaving so she can achieve her ambitions, but to this, Joy says no and tells him love means not being forced to make even such a choice between him and her dreams in the first place.

This is a film where the government, the family and the man do not foreground a female OFW's identity and sense of fulfilment. It's a film where she is given every right to assert her agency, paving the way for a new kind of migrant melodrama that is unapologetically polysemous and progressive

WORDS BY ZITA SHORT

5. THE KINK FACTOR

How erotic author Jacqueline Susann conquoured the box office in the 1970s.

Film critic Roger Ebert once wrote that, "most soap operas are aimed at audiences who are fascinated by the subject of sex, but who want it presented in a disapproving way." This maxim applies to most of the melodramatic blockbusters churned out by Hollywood in the late 1960s. Producers were ready to capitalise on the sex appeal of naked movie stars but they didn't want to challenge the prevailing sexual mores of the day. Even though the Motion Picture Production Code, which banned the presentation of "licentious or suggestive nudity," had been abandoned in 1968, there were still plenty of filmgoers who thought of sexually confident women as dirty, immoral harlots. They accepted the fact that violence and nudity had become more commonplace on screen, but they weren't open to being called out on the fact that they were titillated by the sight of risqué content.

Jacqueline Susann, a failed actress with a gift for self-promotion, responded to the complicated sexual politics of the era with a series of campy potboilers that centred around the lives of the rich and famous. Her most successful novels, 'Valley of the Dolls' and 'Once is Not Enough', became *cause célèbres* in mainstream circles, but they gained a deeper appreciation within the LGBTQ+ community. Susann's deliberately purple prose created a distancing effect that forced her readers to notice the artifice that defines the melodrama genre. In Susann's version of Hollywood, women are neurotic creatures who adopt affectations to armour themselves against a world that is full of capitalist squares. At a time when gay sex was seen as something sinful and dangerous, Susann openly mocked the idea that relationships between aggressively heterosexual individuals were free of conflict or pain. She created a world full of grotesques that inspired readers to derisively chuckle at those who don't wish to see anything in an ironic, playful light.

In bringing her trashterpieces to the screen, producers seemed eager to take advantage of her existing fan base. While in pre-production for *Valley of the Dolls*, David Weisbart instinctively chose to stunt cast Judy Garland – a beloved gay icon – as Helen Lawson, a high-strung diva whose career is on the skids as a result of her substance abuse issues. Lawson's struggles mirrored those that Garland faced in her day-to-day life and the press hungrily ate up the comeback narrative that Weisbart was selling. For LGBTQ+ fans of the novel, this casting couldn't have been more exciting. Garland shared Susann's sardonic wit and willingness to cause outrage, whilst having also been a victim of an uncaring society that trained a critical eye on non-conforming women. When Garland was fired from the film after only spending a week on set, her fans were devastated. The loss of Garland seemed to signal the fact that this would be a safe production that felt uncomfortable with fully tapping into the campy sensibility that defined the source material. Garland created publicity for the film, but her fans weren't left with any deliciously bitchy line readings to savour.

Strait-laced film executives ensured that adaptations of Susann's novels would never get too overtly radical but observant viewers could pick up on the trenchant social satire that lurked behind shots of George Hamilton's golden visage. *Once is Not Enough* told the story of January Wayne, a young woman with an Electra complex who pursues a hedonistic lifestyle after her father marries a lesbian termagant. The ludicrous plot provided Julius J Epstein with a foundation that would support satirical jabs against Hollywood's treatment of aging actresses and the sexual harassment of female employees. The absurdism of the film's premise distracted from the fact that it was embedded with all sorts of hidden meanings. In a post-#MeToo world, this frothy blockbuster emerges as a prescient study of sexual mores that has something to say about the power structures that allow predators like Harvey Weinstein to hide in plain sight.

These films pushed boundaries and increased the stature of LGBTQ+ filmgoers who consumed mainstream blockbusters. The success of these campy provocations proved it was possible to produce commercial art that openly appealed to people who were attracted to a queer sensibility. LGBTQ+ audiences were finally being treated like valuable consumers and LGBTQ+ viewpoints began to gain more prominence in the mainstream. John Waters acknowledged that he had been inspired by Susann's work and ended up going even further than her in making trenchant observations about the absurdity of an aggressively heteronormative society. On a superficial level, *Valley of the Dolls* was just like the prudish erotic dramas that Ebert so despised, but the film's long-lasting cultural impact proved that it was ahead of its time in ways that people could not have predicted

VALLEY OF THE DOLLS
VALLEY OF THE DOLLS
-ONCE IS NOT ENOUGH-

Blue
EYE SHADOW!
286 OTHER Colour Options
REVEAL YOUR SUPER POWDER!
NO RAIN & TEARS WATER PROOF GUARANTEE
HYPNOTIZZZZE in a Glance

Words by **CHRISTINA NEWLAND** *Illustration by* **LAURÉNE BOGLIO**

#22 Threads

Blue Eye Shadow

It seems remarkably fitting that Divine's first film with John Waters would be a 16mm short called *Eat Your Makeup* (1968). Divine's enactment of stereotypical, outlandish femininity – and his remarkable use of OTT makeup to highlight and exaggerate his features – would have him called, among other things, "the drag queen of the century," by *People* magazine. Perhaps the most striking of those make-up looks, and as such the use of cosmetics for the screen in a way that truly fashions an entire persona – is in *Pink Flamingos* (1972), where Divine wears blue eyeshadow that climbs all the he way up to his brows, which are shaved off and repainted on in a highly artificial style. To think of Divine, or of that film, is to imagine someone in blue eyeshadow.

Blue eyeshadow is one of the most electrifyingly noticeable forms of cosmetic a person can wear; it gives truth to the lie of 'natural' beauty via make-up. It's what little kids smear on their faces when they get into their mother's makeup kits. For nearly as long as we've been recording human culture, arguments about the correct usage and propriety of cosmetics have existed. Since Ancient Egyptian times, both men and women used kohl, red ochre on the cheeks and lips, and pigment to shade and define their eyes, making the irises brighter and the whites of their eyes whiter. For nearly as long, commentators have professed worry about feminine deception or uncouth sexual power deriving from the use of makeup. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the cosmetics industry gave rise to more widespread (although markedly women-only) use, and blue shadows were put on the market by brands like Helena Rubinstein and Maybelline. Film stars like Maureen O'Sullivan were sharing their blue-shadow makeup routines with *Photoplay Magazine* by the early 1930s.

So, as it turns out, Divine had both cinema forebears and descendants. Once proclaiming he would like to be a 'cross between Liz Taylor and Godzilla,' he swiped on a blue shadow in honour of the former. For her epic 1963 film *Cleopatra*, Taylor applied her own makeup, carefully drawing on the half-moon of ice blue and the thick black liner that would inspire a generation of trends. Hers too reached nearly to her brows, moving Hollywood makeup artist Perc Westmore, considered an authority on the matter, to comment that she had overdone it. Naturally, a man would insist that he knew how to do a woman's make-up better than she did; the prevailing attitude was that cosmetics were intended to subtly highlight beauty, not to brashly pronounce personality. Both Liz Taylor and Divine shared in smudging on their blue eye makeup with an intention of the latter.

A fascinating Divine copycat arrives in the form of Disney's villainous Ursula the Sea Witch, who sports blue shadow up to her thin, drawn-on brows in *The Little Mermaid*. Her face is more interesting than Ariel's, and far less demure. (Animator Rob Minkoff, realising he had drawn a character that looked so much like Divine, decided to run with it, and Ursula ends up with many of Divine's mannerisms, too.)

Jeff Goodwin mixed two Lancôme shadows to achieve the deep, Technicolor-saturated look of Isabella Rossellini's lids in *Blue Velvet* (1985). Her character is a terrifying locus of sexual abandon and confusion for the male protagonist in Lynch's film. In Anna Biller's retro-chic horror film *The Love Witch* (2016), the protagonist has immaculate blue lids painted with a strong black cat-eye liner – worn as she literally bewitches and seduces men to often cataclysmic results. Even the more innocuous-looking, dreamy Christina Ricci of Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo 66* (1998) has a captivating, trancelike effect on Gallo in the film, with her pouty glossed lips and more womanly painted eyes.

Even with more pervasive and open-minded use of cosmetics as a form of self-expression – for all genders – the old visual stereotypes about women and makeup remain. The the overt, 'gaudy' makeup-wearer is seen as more sexually open, obnoxious, even villainous, often a harbinger of feminine power that seems to scare or mystify men. These days, a turn back toward maximalist beauty trends, which welcome creativity rather than conformist cleanliness, sees Divine's style of garish face-painting in an altogether more flattering light. In shows like HBO's *Euphoria*, glittery, colourful eye makeup is everywhere, on characters of all gender identities and beauty types. Embracing the very gaudiness of blue eyeshadow, existing as it does onscreen in the Venn diagram of the feminine ideal and caricature of femininity, feels like a net win for drag queens everywhere

THE PINK FLAMINGOS ISSUE

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THE
AFTERLIGHT

Words and interview by **MARINA ASHIOTI**

Raising the Dead

The Afterlight *is an archive montage film by Charlie Shackleton which asks the viewer to consider context, representation and impermenance.*

London-based filmmaker Charlie Shackleton has created an experimental, feature-length montage of scenes from films made before 1960. It exists on a single print of 35mm film. *The Afterlight*, as a "living document of its life in circulation," is a transient artefact subject to its own decay, eroding each time it unspools for each new audience. It's a poignant exercise in turning the archival site of excavation into one of construction, transforming belatedness into becomingness by recovering these lost cinematic artefacts. This singular print has an ambivalent existence, one that's as corporeal as it is spectral.

"I knew I was interested in the idea of archive material as a repository of memory," Shackleton explains. "Even in fiction films, fragments of performance can function as a testament to something that actually took place." The one foundational constraint Shackleton gave himself in the selection process was that everyone depicted on screen should no longer be alive. "It meant that using films made after about 1960 became a lot less practical because you're constantly cutting around people who are still alive," he explains. As soon as the pool was narrowed down to films made before 1960, almost all the archival material was in black-and-white, and the vast majority in the boxy Accademy ratio, determining the look and feel of *The Afterlight* before any aesthetic choices had to be made.

Pairing sequences from that wealth of material down to the smallest of movements and actions, and often moving away from dialogue, these condensed records of performances in their purest sense began to unravel. Each brief occurrence, each fleeting glance, each ephemeral gesture and touch relays an alternative form of archival knowledge. That complex and embodied tapestry of feeling, from banal to profound, is gauged through the most temporary artistic medium: the human action behind performance. In this associative narrative formed by the dissonance of altered context, the viewer is confronted with these echoes of human actions, but also, per Shackleton, "the detritus of everything that echo has meant over the last however many decades."

There's an uneasy peace held within the material, as spectres of screen actors gather within an imaginary tavern. A neon-lit sign reading 'The Afterlight' hangs above a door in a gloomy backstreet making up the only non-archival establishing shot in the film (and shot by cinematographer Robbie Ryan at that!). Old Hollywood stars comingle with lesser-known actors whose names and works have been lost to time, the legacies of the former mostly embellished, and of the latter often corrupted. Within *The Afterlight*, their vestiges take on a transcendent charge.

The material Shackleton had access to consisted of what archives had chosen to preserve, and what they'd chosen to make available to the public. He expands, "The extent to which that is overwhelmingly anglophone and American is impossible to overstate. It took real work to push against how much the world's archives just want you to consume the same four dozen directors from North America and France." If *The Afterlight* passively were to reflect what's available of film heritage, it would have been 90 per cent English language. Dialling it back to about 30 per cent meant that, while still making up the biggest percentage, the viewing experience would not be as overwhelming.

And that's before we even get into what the material looks and sounds like. Celluloid is a highly sensitive and flammable material prone to discoloration, molecular change and, in some cases, self-ignition, and Shackleton doesn't shy away from putting on display the implicit politics in which films are deemed worthy of preservation. A clip from a Hitchcock film that's over 80 years old looks and sounds pristine, as if it were shot yesterday. There are also clips that have barely survived, due to being from less culturally dominant parts of the world, or from non-commercially valuable filmmakers. He describes what we have left of them as, "accidents of history".

Within a burgeoning, globalised industry of persisting inequalities, the tendency to perpetuate an idea of cinema as a culturally level playing field, a "universal language across cultures," will always equate to an uncritical projection of idealism. "The tendency and the temptation to smooth over all those differences and make everything speak with one voice is something I find very frustrating in a lot of found footage work," says Shackleton. "There's a very basic animal

satisfaction in seeing that magic trick take place, where two people from across space and time are able to coexist in some way, however briefly. It's like the *Forrest Gump* effect, or the *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* effect. To me, that's so obviously an illusion in every sense, that it does astound me when people do it uncritically." Although some sequences in *The Afterlight* flirt with the idea, they are tempered by a confrontation with its ethical limits.

Enshrined in the annals of collective memory is a seemingly permanent cinematic canon that speaks to a perpetual cultural nostalgia. Within an era of underfunding and artistic conservatism, Shackleton thinks, "There's almost a financial imperative to do another *Citizen Kane* rerelease or another Antonioni season." When asked about the permanence of the standard white auteur canon that we've grown so used to, he believes it might not even be known in 50 years, but, "It may not have been replaced by a more diverse, eclectic canon. It may just be replaced by an ever-present now."

We've grown so accustomed to the hyper-ubiquitous availability of culture afforded to us through the oceanic morass of data on the archive of all archives. Almost everything is equally available on the internet, imbuing our "ever-present now" with a temporal flattening of all influence and reference. This is something that makes Shackleton's recontextualisation of the past as a nod to the role of cinema within collective memory feel all the more apt.

Buried deep within archives lie rich, unsung histories forgotten and downplayed by the canon. "You can't collapse all the things that make these people and the films that they're coming from different," and so the shared aspect between the films became more of a figurative one, specifically the purgatorial idea of where they are now, prompting the question: how long do these performances live on?

Shackleton describes his approach to filmmaking as one that's more informed by the context in which his work is viewed. With *The Afterlight*, the context of viewership is baked right in as it performs for one audience at a time. "I've never really understood filmmakers who view their films as something they make in the abstract and then release to be consumed in any which way," he says. "When I'm making a film, I'm constantly thinking about the context in which it's going to be viewed. That has as much – or more – influence on how someone feels about it."

It's the way physical film creates a material link with each audience that drew Shackleton to analog, rather than the particular aesthetic or physical nature of 35mm. "Archives are interesting to me as collections of those experiences, collections of items that provide those experiences. And this has been a theme in my work – in the material conditions of film viewing, which might be in the cinema watching a 35mm print, or might be at home streaming a film on a laptop."

Asked whether there were any moments of spontaneity underpinning his process, Shackleton describes a scene from

“This has been a theme in my work – in the material conditions of film viewing, which might be in the cinema watching a 35mm print, or might be at home streaming a film on a laptop.”

the 1941 film *The Wolf Man*. “It’s Lon Chaney Jr walking around a living room, rubbing his arms, scratching his skin, removing certain layers of clothing.” In the original context of the film, it’s very clear that the character is beginning to transform into (you guessed it!) a wolf, with the score pointing us in the direction of that very clear narrative interpretation. By removing the score and completely stripping the film of its narrative context, Shackleton describes being struck by how mysterious and beautiful it became. “Suddenly it was transformed into this completely mundane, but also mysterious and intriguing domestic ballet, where a man moves around a space and seems to wrestle with that space, but also with his own interiority.” In this new light, it’s difficult to grasp the actions that are carried out, a premise that became a guiding principle as he continued looking for footage. “So yeah, *The Wolf Man*, of all things.”

The sonic character of *The Afterlight* began to take shape as Shackleton removed all the music and soundtracks, as it was that one particular layer of artifice which got in the way of reaching back to the original moment of performance. “Because it’s so all-consuming, especially in a lot of these films where the score is quite melodramatic. I knew I wanted to pull that back, but I didn’t want to make the films then sound like a contemporary film, or like *The Afterlight*, whatever that would mean.”

The compromise he reached was replacing the sound in the films that had scoring, but exclusively with sounds from elsewhere in the film. “In that clip from *The Wolf Man*, when you hear him pacing around that room, that’s footsteps from elsewhere in *The Wolf Man*. In practice, that meant having a library of 200-to-300 silences, which is fascinating in and of itself. You could do a whole audio project on how filmmakers render silence, especially compared to nowadays. Almost none of them are remotely silent – some of them are deafening!” A combination of intentional atmos, limitations in sound recording equipment and the degradation of time, offer an incredible result, before they even make it on the print of *The Afterlight* which again, becomes a material thing subject to its own evolving sound and degradation. “All of it will now decay, but some of it had a real head-start.”

Sat in a screening room at BFI Southbank, I can feel why *The Afterlight* is so pertinent. The viewing experience is akin to watching an Apichatpong Weerasethakul film – that meditative, trance-like state of reverie. Capturing that pure, affective charge of performance through these lost cultural artefacts, cinema history is presented in a way that no longer suppresses the traumas endured by celluloid, nor conceals the neglect suffered by underprivileged material. It’s a portrait of film heritage as it exists now, more than a portrait of the first half of the 20th century, one imbued with an almost paradoxical sense of aura, each projection moulding the print as if it were clay, and cinema sculpture in time

The Afterlight *is on tour through the UK in June and July. For details on screenings, head to theafterlight.xyz*

Interview by **DAVID JENKINS** *Illustration by* **FIONA MCDONNELL**

Mia Hansen-Løve

The Bergman Island *writer/director taps into the joys of solitude when it comes to unlocking inner creativity.*

Bergman Island is a new film by the French writer/director Mia Hansen-Løve, which explores the relationship between two filmmakers – Vicky Krieps' Chris and Tim Roth's Tony – as they retreat to the island of Fårö to write screenplays. The pair interact with the legacy of Ingmar Bergman, spending time in his house and exploring the locations of his later films, and his shadow looms large over their nascent projects.

LWLies: Regarding Bergman Island, when was your first encounter with Fårö? When did it occur to you that you may want to film there? Hansen-Løve: It wasn't when I saw films that were shot there, but it was the pictures of the island that were in the book that was made for the auction of the Bergman estate. After Bergman died, he wanted to sell everything because he thought it would be too difficult to divide among all his kids. And so, everything was supposed to be sold and they made a book for the auction. In the book there was pictures of many of the objects like the paintings that were in his house, but also everyday life objects like lamps and clocks. But also there were pictures of the houses, of his car. I remember being impressed by the pictures of his cars. To me, it gave me a very strong feeling of the island as being a kind of haunted place – like you see in a Hitchcock film.

And that ghostliness was attractive as a film location? Of course, it's not what gave me the idea to do the film but I think that the attraction that I felt to this haunted place met my desire to make a film about a relationship and artistic creation. This must have been after I made *Eden*. Also, after *Eden*, I started to have this idea of making a film about a couple of directors. It was this idea that was brewing up in me but it wasn't clear yet where it was going or where it would be set. And then I met Greta Gerwig, who has a part in *Eden*, in Paris for a couple of days and she was coming back from Fårö with Noah Baumbach, and they told me about their experience of their trip, and all these things at some point came together and that was the start of the process of *Bergman Island*.

That's so funny that Noah Baumbach would then go and make *Marriage Story* after going to Fårö. Well, it was certainly not an accident, I'm sure he's a great fan of Bergman's. And I'm sure it was influenced by *Scenes from a Marriage*.

Do you think it's a good skill to know how to be alone? Yes – part of my admiration for him has to do with his aptitude for being alone. Which is actually very unusual. Of course, we know a lot of great artists who must have lived alone and faced this loneliness. But among filmmakers it is less common. Because the job of a filmmaker is a job where you are always surrounded by people – you have to enjoy being with people. And I'm sure Bergman also enjoyed that a lot. There is footage of him on his sets of his films and you can see he actually loved being there, he has this childish smile that is very seductive. But he was able to get away from that at the end of his life as he became darker or more melancholic – he enjoyed solitude more than anything.

But I admire that because I think when you make films it is very difficult to preserve that solitude and to desire it. That's why we see so many directors, for instance, who write their first feature alone, then maybe a second, then that's over, they start writing with co-writers and then they can never write alone again. I've seen so many of them around me.

And yet you still write alone, if I'm not mistaken? Yes. And I think that's partly why I'm so determined to try and still work my scripts myself, not because I think I write better than anybody else, not that I think I'm gifted or anything, but because it's actually pretty difficult for me to write. But I still think that the kind of things you can find when you face solitude – when you go into yourself – you cannot find if you disappear among people all the time.

If you do not face fears, or the meaning of your life or whatever you want to call it. I think there are things that you can face, or say or express only if you can look into yourself alone, accept the silence and the voice. It's about silence. It's about God. It's about patience too. I think that the job of a filmmaker can really take you away from that if you are not careful

Bergman Island

Directed by	**MIA HANSEN-LØVE**
Starring	**VICKY KRIEPS, TIM ROTH, MIA WASIKOWSKA**
Released	**OUT NOW**

Few films show so much disdain for men as *Bergman Island*. Set on the Swedish island of Fårö where Ingmar Bergman lived, Mia Hansen-Løve uses the framework of a couple's working holiday to dissect the directorial titan and his notorious personal life. So snide is Hansen-Løve's critique that male audiences will likely watch the film blissfully unaware of its subtle deconstruction of masculine behaviour and the patriarchal social system that enables it.

In *Bergman Island*, Amy (Mia Wasikowska) tells Joseph (Anders Danielsen Lie) that she is different from him because she loves two people, while he merely has sex with multiple partners. Given that their dialogue is the fabrication of filmmaker Chris (Vicky Krieps), there is a level of fantasising to this exchange. Her husband, Tony (Tim Roth), is a director of genre flicks who gives great import to his financially successful but unoriginal projects. He aligns himself to the twisted side of Bergman's psyche, a fan of psychodramas such as *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers*.

Chris, on the other hand, prefers Bergman's more romantic mode – think *Summer with Monika* or *Fanny and Alexander*. Unlike Tony, she is hesitant to sleep in the bed from *Scenes from a Marriage* or write at Bergman's desk. The film she wants to make, shown in parallel during *Bergman Island*'s second act, is essentially a Hansen-Løve film within a Hansen-Løve film.

Fårö becomes a site of speculation, just as it was for Bergman. After hearing about Bergman's sequence of wives and lovers, Chris ruminates on the nature of marriage and fidelity. She forgoes the tourist-trap 'Bergman Safari' to explore the island instead with a handsome young student she meets at the gift shop. There she buys the sunglasses Bibi Andersson wore in *Persona*, a film about split personalities and the existential crisis of lives lived and lost.

This makes the film sound philosophical and impenetrable. But Hansen-Løve always keeps Bergman's own cinematic trappings at arm's length. There is truth to a monologue which climaxes with "fuck Bergman", and when a student mansplains to the female tour guide that *Shame* was released in the UK with a definite article, one cannot help but laugh.

Hansen-Løve allows herself one Bergmanesque oneiric moment in the film – a burst of Mahler, a thunderous ticking clock, chimes, and a flashforward in time. It's beautifully executed, and represents the furthest Hansen-Løve has strayed from realism in her career. The play with narrative here shows her to be at her most assured as a filmmaker, willing to take risks in new directions. Rather than an attempt at directorial mimicry, *Bergman Island* is a unique vision from one of the greatest directors working today. **LILLIAN CRAWFORD**

ANTICIPATION. 5
Mia Hansen-Løve has yet to make an imperfect film, and the international cast is to die for.

ENJOYMENT. 5
A meditation on relationships that hilariously deconstructs the canonisation of Ingmar Bergman.

IN RETROSPECT. 5
We would happily spend all summer with Mia.

The Princess

Directed by **ED PERKINS**
Released **30 JUNE**

ANTICIPATION.
Could you get any more beige than a documentary about Diana?.
2

ENJOYMENT.
The good kind of beige, of trenchcoats and social commentary.
3

IN RETROSPECT.
Offers a kaleidoscope of new perspectives on a worn-out establishment.
4

"Petition for the canonisation of Lady Di?" lies *Amelie*, as she knocks on doors in her technicolour world, far from the sun-bleached cornershop window of this documentary. But the Princess may as well be Saint Diana – enshrined in pop culture and able to transcend any criticism levelled at her. Ed Perkins' *The Princess* cracks the eggshell of that baffling magnetism – this was a person who, as one embittered reporter remarks within the film, "Called a press conference to tell people to leave her alone." But for all her privilege, this documentary shows that The People's Princess was capable of having real human facial expressions, kept some granules of spontaneity despite the rigidity demanded by her role, and really did throw a spanner in the royal works. She shifted the state of the royalty from stagnation to entropy. Occasionally, she even drove her own car. She was unquestionably significant.

The Princess charts Diana's public life from doe-eyed ingenue to divorced pillar of idolatry, controversy and philanthropy. It also documents the mass grief unleashed by the F Scott-Fitzgerald-tragedy of her death. The film has no new interviews or narration. It presents a panoramic, non-judgemental collage of contemporaneous footage, of the subject and her new fam, but also, of the reporters who followed them around and the public who morbidly consumed morsel thrown to them.

A sense of the era, when paparazzi were particularly hungry and the monarchy was losing its mojo, is viscerally evoked with neither nostalgia nor scorn. The weird, washed-out palette of the '80s and '90s (did it really look like that? No one remembers) speaks for itself, through vox pops conducted in hairdressers full of ordinary women aping the Princess' hedgehog-hair, the fags dangling from mouths in pubs, and the BBC English still spoken without irony.

The layering of material is done carefully, with narrative embedded within the images. Charles and Diana's doomed marriage moves through time and newspaper headlines with the clunky waltz of a forced fairy tale. The supreme discomfort of it all is squirm-inducing. Both are trapped by circumstance – the film acknowledges the sadness of these living anachronisms, existing with the constant presence of their own image reflected at them, while also showing the sickening luxury they inhabit. As such, empathy is cleverly mediated.

Diana's disastrous attempt to exist as a modern person in an ancient system exposes the flickering obsolescence of the monarchy. Throughout the documentary, press coverage is manipulated, biographies hit the shelves and exclusive interviews are dished out. The film shows the Royals being repeatedly accused of becoming no more than a branch of the entertainment industry – such criticisms now follow their next generation. But as this string of footage suggests, the monarchy is pure entertainment. They function as a conduit for public catharsis – yet Diana offered something more personal, more dramatic to the British Royal saga. **SASKIA LLOYD-GAIGER**

Blind Ambition

Directed by **WARWICK ROSS, ROBERT COE**
Starring **JOSEPH DHAFANA, MARLVIN GWESE, PARDON TAKUZU**
Released **12 AUGUST**

Warwick Ross and Robert Coe's *Blind Ambition* follows four refugees on the lead up to their becoming the first ever Zimbabwean team to compete in the World Wine Tasting Championship. Joseph, Marlvin, Pardon and Tinashe all fled from Zimbabwe to South Africa around a decade before their team was formed in order to escape the turmoil in their home country.

Initially entering the hospitality industry to support their families, the four men progressed from waiters to sommeliers due to their acquired taste in wine, consequentially abandoning the paths they had set out for their new lives in order to fully commit themselves to their craft. Surprisingly none of the four had met one another before moving to South Africa: it was their shared passion for wine, mixed with a stroke of good fortune, that brought them together at a competition to find the next South African wine-tasting team.

Through a series of interviews with the team and their families throughout the film we discover the extent to which these men have defied the odds. Taking life-threatening passages to cross into South Africa, arriving with no money and facing the hardships of living in some of the country's more dangerous settlements, the group must also contend with the struggle of entering as a refugee into a country that is still – to a large extent – bound to the racist ideology of its past.

Ross and Coe's style of filmmaking is simplistic, yet it is complimented by the unique power of story and the charismatic subjects. The Zimbabwean team are fun, passionate and make for an delightful company as they joke among themselves and the documentary team.

What stands out most about the film is the Zimbabwean patriotism that resonates through the team. While all four men were eager to flee their homeland, they are clearly proud of their Zimbabwean roots. Wine-tasting is a niche interest, especially at this level, so it is powerful watching not only the pride of the team as they shine a light on the talent of the Zimbabwean people on a global level, but also the support and pride of Zimbabwe as they witness the recognition of the team. It's heartening to see Zimbabwe be defined not solely by the political or economic issues of their country, but by the great extent of their individual talents.

While there is a focus on the road to the championship and the outcome of the competition, the real joy of *Blind Ambition* is watching the strength and ambition in the team. How they not only changed the lives of themselves and their families, but also exposed the world to the untapped talent present in Zimbabwe.

JOJO AJISAFE

ANTICIPATION. 3
*Billed as "*Cool Runnings *in the competitive world of blind wine tasting." We'll see...*

ENJOYMENT. 4
A lovely underdog tale that delivers deeper geoplitical resonances.

IN RETROSPECT. 4
An ode to upward mobility and destroying the inherently-racist old ways.

Pleasure

Directed by	**NINJA THYBERG**
Starring	**SOFIA KAPPEL, EVELYN CLAIRE, MARK SPIEGLER**
Released	**15 JUNE**

ANTICIPATION.
Thyberg's 2013 short of the same name was a strong calling card. **4**

ENJOYMENT.
A (porn) star is born in this well-researched drama with a sumptuous sting. **4**

IN RETROSPECT.
Feels like the first film of its kind. **4**

From its very opening, *Pleasure* denies its viewers dominance: the kind inherent to pornographic consumption, as the black screen vibrates with moans, growling and affirmations of a suitably nasty kind. Deprived of explicit imagery but peppered with salacious – and ultimately banal – 'porn talk', the establishing shot hints at the provocative game Swedish filmmaker Ninja Thyberg invites the audience to with her feature debut. *Pleasure* is both sweet and sour as a coming-of-age story, following 19-year old Swede Linnéa (Sofia Kappel) in her journey to become the next big LA porn star armed with the coquettish pseudonym 'Bella Cherry'.

While offering a candid account of sex work in the mainstream porn industry, the film also allows for a process of gradual acquaintance. There's an insistent intimacy in the way Sophie Winqvist's inquisitive camera probes every corner; be it of the frame, or the labyrinths of consent. It's the hunger for power in the adult movie business in particular that has fascinated Thyberg for a long time. Six years of field research and decades of reading feminist theory have now yielded this audacious feature. With it, it seems like cinema has caught up with the multivalence of the debate. Thyberg exposes the circulations of bodily capital but does so through variations and character reinvention. Most of the actors in the film are industry figures, some of them emblematic (agent Mark Spiegler, director Aiden Starr, actor Evelyn Claire), except for its star-protagonist, Bella.

Kappel is astonishing in her acting debut and carries the role with a levity that is nothing short of mesmerising – she moves between the timidity of "stage fright" and brazen self-assertion effortlessly. While these ambivalent moments are interspersed throughout the narrative, the rhythm and pace with which it unfolds only deepens the two opposing forces governing Bella's drive: from doe-eyed amateur to prime hustler. The power games are often what's missing in discussions of sex work – that it is less about the latter than the former, and Kappel's magnetic performance channels this hierarchy in the way she locks the camera's gaze and then makes it her own. Through tempered smiles, curious glances, and later, a porcelain façade, Kappel subverts a role which is bound to physicality and allows the film's emotional undercurrents to play out on her face.

Disrupting familiar patterns, the film is committed to providing alternative points of view and underappreciated camera angles in the destabilisation of conventional porn aesthetics. Karl Frid's score imbues many of these scenes with sublime affect, weaving R&B beats and synths with bursts of choir singing. By replacing one, more earthly transcendence, with another, *Pleasure* lays bare the paradoxes of complying to a flawed system, and critiques the commercialisation of human bodies with orgasmic poeticism.

SAVINA PETKOVA

Interview by **HANNAH STRONG** *Illustration by* **FIONA MCDONNELL**

Ninja Thyberg

The director of porn world chronicle, Pleasure*, tells of her switch from anti-porn zealot to embracer of a more progressive form of screen eroticism.*

Ninja Thyberg has spent years studying the adult film industry. After completing a short film about porn which received acclaim at Sundance and Cannes, her audacious feature debut, *Pleasure*, premiered at Sundance in 2020. She explains how her origins as a teenage anti-porn activist eventually led her to embrace the world and fight for better depiction of sex work on screen.

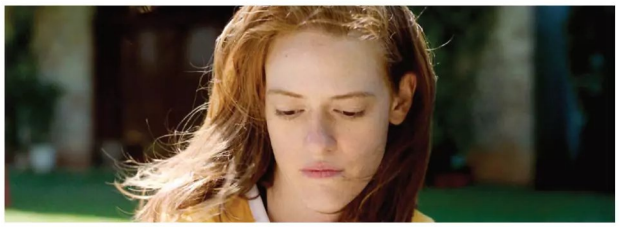
LWLies: As a teenager you were an anti-porn activist – what led you to that movement? Thyberg: As a teenager I realised the culture of the boys I knew revolved around porn. They were exchanging different porn films, talking about how hot the girls were. I realised how extremely normalised it was, and also that the porn was so brutal in many ways. I knew that porn existed but I didn't know how common it was, and I really had this image in my head of porn as this Vaseline on the lens, softcore erotic sort of thing. When I saw these films, they really shocked me and I thought it was so degrading, it was so brutal, and like the women were treated just as fuck dolls. For the young guys were watching it, that was their sexual education. Women's sexual education at the time was watching romantic comedies, or reading women's magazines, maybe an erotic novel, where things were super tame.

So, when I was with my first boyfriend, we were both virgins, but what we expected from each other and the way we thought sex would be was totally different. That made me so sad and angry. I was already a feminist, but then for a few years I was really engaged in the anti porn movement.

What changed your view? After a while I started to feel it was problematic that we always focused on objectification and exploitation, and I felt like there was a lack of positive representation of sexuality. I wanted something more, and felt that porn didn't necessarily have to be a bad thing. I became interested in feminist porn, and started to understand that I'm never going to be able to erase all these images, but what I can do is to try to make other images and make people open their minds to more perspectives. I then studied gender at university and wrote my thesis about porn on the internet.

How were you and the cast able to maintain a positive working environment while also maintaining the illusion that what we see on screen is real? We shot in 2019 so didn't have an intimacy coordinator, because we didn't know about them, but looking back I think it would have been really good! On our set I had to do that job, at the same time as being the director, and it's a very full-time job for a film like this. But Sofia was very comfortable with all the nudity, and she's never completely naked. There's always these patches, and then in a lot of scenes where she appears to be naked when we're using close-ups. There's only a few wide shots. I got a lot of help from the adult film performers, because they are so comfortable with being naked all the time. They were super relaxed, and that made Sofia more relaxed because she was in an environment where nudity is something is totally normal. And they shoot a lot of softcore porn, where you don't show any penetration, so they fake-fuck.

How has the porn industry reacted to the film? There's been many different types of reactions, I think because there's so many different perspectives within the industry. Some of the people who acted in the film are very close friends of mine and they're supportive of my perspective and the story I'm telling, but then there are others who aren't on the same side as me. We had a screening where some of the men felt that the film was focussing too much on the negative aspects of porn, but then some of the men who initially criticised the film have now changed their mind. I think maybe they were initially shocked to see it from a female perspective – like finally they thought, 'What are we doing to these women? Are we part of the problem?' I'm not too surprised that the film has been criticised, but others within porn have said it's very realistic and authentic. The idea I really wanted to highlight within the film is that the problems Bella faces don't have anything to do with the fact that people are having sex. It's power structures. It's oppression. That's not happening only in the porn industry, those things happen everywhere. I'm trying to show the ways that porn can be a mirror of our society, or maybe that porn is a mirror of patriarchy and capitalism



Moon, 66 Questions

Directed by **JACQUELINE LENTZOU**
Starring **SOFIA KOKKALI, NIKOS HANAKOULAS, LAZAROS GEORGAKOPOULOS**
Released **24 JUNE**

An emotionally estranged relationship between a young woman and her father makes for a fairly simple premise, yet one that assumes a distinctive and heartfelt tenderness when filtered through the lens of filmmaker Jacqueline Lentzou. Hers is a cinematic language of delicate minimalism, of finding poetry within pockets of the mundane, and the beauty of her debut feature is sustained in the details of its stunning 35mm visuals.

Sofia Kokkali gives a phenomenal performance as Artemis, a young woman who tentatively returns to her childhood home as she finds out that her father Paris (Lazaros Georgakopoulos) has been diagnosed with MS after suffering a severe stroke. Through the act of caregiving, the intricate Gordian knot that manifested in Artemis' childhood begins to unravel, kickstarting a subtle process of reconciliation between parent and child.

The titular moon makes multiple appearances within the corroded VHS footage that punctuates the narrative, guided by the reflective tone of Artemis' journal entries. Paired with artful shots of Tarot cards that cut through the film, these astrological framing devices lend the film an ornate, scrapbook-like structure. Unfortunately, this is a path that neuters the payoff and compromises some emotional impact. Lentzou is certainly onto a winning formula, but it's the superb performances that ultimately make up for *Moon*'s shortcomings. **MARINA ASHIOTI**

ANTICIPATION
Lentzou's short film The End of Suffering *was exquisite, so really hyped for her debut feature.* **4**

ENJOYMENT
Much visual poetry bolstered by some fantastic performances. **4**

IN RETROSPECT
Alas, the moon didn't get to ask any questions... **3**

Everything Went Fine

Directed by **FRANÇOIS OZON**
Starring **SOPHIE MARCEAU, ANDRÉ DUSSOLLIER, GÉRALDINE PAILHAS**
Released **17 JUNE**

There's something deeply alienating about the work of French cinematic odd-jobber François Ozon. Despite a preternatural ability to handle a range of tones and styles, there's a nihilism at the core of his cinematic project. *Everything Went Fine* is another robust piece of coffee table arthouse fare which deals with the morals, ethics and emotions that come with the legally-tortuous act of assisted suicide. It is an adaptation of the 2013 memoir by the late French author and screenwriter Emmanuèle Bernheim, dourly played here by Sophie Marceau. It concerns the decision of her father (a fiery André Dossollier) to be taken to a specialist clinic in Switzerland following a stroke and to have his life prematurely terminated.

What's strange about the situation is that, even though his condition appears to improve to the point where he's cognisant, sensitive and retains a level of autonomy, he's adamant to go through with his scheme. Emmanuèle tries to softly coax him down from the ledge, but he's a man that, seemingly, will not be moved. Shot during the pandemic, there's a rough-and-ready visual quality to the film to the point where it feels like Ozon is something of an ambient presence, allowing his actors to do all the heavy lifting. It's an engaging movie about being able to control one's destiny, but the wait continues for when this director will pull something truly heartfelt out of the bag. **DAVID JENKINS**

ANTICIPATION
Another year, anther François Ozon movie. Bring it on, I guess... **3**

ENJOYMENT
Another robust drama that ticks all the boxes in a very careful way. **3**

IN RETROSPECT
Still waiting for the passion project that lifts him above the coffee table pack. **3**

A CURZON FILM

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Eiffel

Directed by **MARTIN BOURBOULON**
Starring **EMMA MACKEY, PIERRE DELADONCHAMPS, ROMAIN DURIS**
Released **12 AUGUST**

ANTICIPATION. 3
[Eiffel 65 singer voice] "Yo, listen up, here's a story..."

ENJOYMENT. 2
"Gustave Eiffel has to think about his entire sex life before he engineers."

IN RETROSPECT. 2
A promising taste of Emma Mackey's potential as a French-language film star, but little else.

Eiffel isn't so much a biopic of French engineer Gustave Eiffel (played here by Romain Duris), but rather a work of fiction inspired by certain historical facts. It posits why exactly Eiffel had a sudden change of heart in becoming involved with the metal tower project that would adopt his name after initially abstaining.

The facts, according to the film, are as such: during construction of a bridge in Bordeaux in 1860, Eiffel had a passionate romance with a woman named Adrienne Bourgès (Emma Mackey). A wedding was announced but cancelled by her parents. Many years later, Eiffel's son married Bourgès' niece, meaning the two were reunited. What the film suggests is that maybe they actually met again before that, with the potential rekindling of a lost love driving Eiffel's pursuit of the titanic tower undertaking, despite her now being married to his old friend, Antoine (Pierre Deladonchamps).

Martin Bourboulon's film is handsomely mounted, with visual effects, costuming and production design fully justifying its nominations for France's César Awards. At the centre, Duris and Mackey have a solid rapport. This is French-British rising star Mackey's first screen role in French, and she's charismatic enough to make future French-language features centred on her seem enticing. That said, as engaging as she is, her casting simultaneously embodies the sloppiness of the film as a whole.

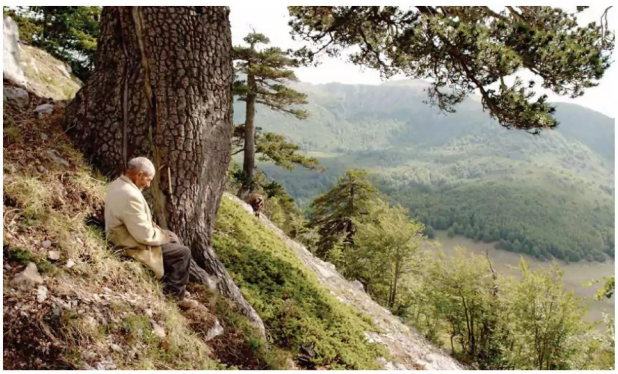
Mackey was 23 when the first half of Eiffel's shoot occurred in the final third of 2019, and 24 when the pandemic-delayed second part resumed later in 2020. According to the records that informed the film's narrative, Adrienne Bourgès was 18 when she met Gustave Eiffel (himself 28) in Bordeaux of 1860. That year is explicitly stated on screen. When the pair reunite for the first time after decades apart, at a dinner party, it's 1886 (also explicitly stated), and so Mackey is therefore meant to be around 44 for most of her screen time – an age she absolutely doesn't look.

There is no discernible attempt to age her up with makeup in the late 1880s scenes. Instead, rather inexplicably, clear attempts with the makeup are only present in the 1860 flashbacks, where the entire solution for ageing her down for when the character's not yet in her twenties – to make there be a perceptible difference between Bourgès in the two timelines – seems to have just been to give her a fairly strong tan when younger.

The carelessness extends to the very structure of the film. The emotional resonance of the romance isn't fully realised thanks to the constant jumping around in time. Amusingly, a few flashbacks triggered while Eiffel's mid-designing the tower involve him and Bourgès romping dangerously close to witnesses. A possible joke about Paris' most phallic landmark, later undermined by the suggestion of what the tower's shape is actually supposed to represent (hint: a letter). The last shot of the film spells out the tower's design's connection to Adrienne Bourgès with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

Il Buco



Directed by **MICHELANGELO FRAMMARTINO**
Starring **PAOLO COSSI, JACOPO ELIA, NICOLA LANZA**
Released **OUT NOW**

ANTICIPATION. 4
It's been an age since Frammartino's previous film. What's taking him so long?

ENJOYMENT. 5
Okay, fair play. An astonishing, James Cameron-style document of a 1960s spelunking escapade.

IN RETROSPECT. 5
A film about the power of intricate detail and the inherent artistry in pathfinding discovery.

It has been 11 long years since the Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Frammartino graced us with his wonderful, goat-filled doc-fiction hybrid, *Le Quattro Volte*, but the wait has been worth it. *Il Buco* is translated as "The Hole", and it is a film about people who dedicate their lives to discovery, and people who dedicate their lives to chronicling discovery.

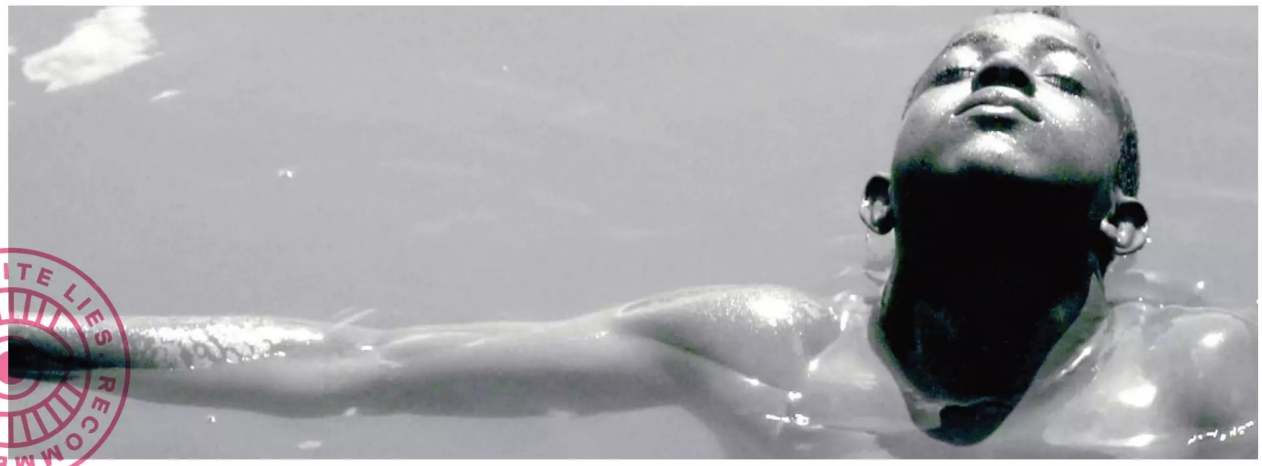
There's a way of watching *Il Buco* that may take a little time to attune to, in the same way you might have to while watching a Jacques Tati movie. It's a question of image navigation: Frammartino shoots mainly in long shots and the manner in which you take the story in is, as above, a bit of a game. You must first work out where your attention is supposed to be focused, and then if you do follow your instincts, you must then calculate whether you are missing out on details elsewhere. There might be a clue, like a dim flicker of light in the middle distance, or some rumbling sounds emanating from a certain area off-screen. But each shot needs to be unlocked.

On that note: filmmakers vocally pleading with audiences to see movies in the cinema – or the biggest screen available to them – is currently in vogue despite valid protestations regarding accessibility. One hopes that Frammartino joins the chorus, as it genuinely seems as if he has made a film which only functions in its intended way by being experienced in the enclosed, sensory-deprived environs of a pitch black and completely silent cinema. And one with a top spec sound system for that matter. There is no doubt that seeing this on a laptop or a phone would yield a completely different experience – and a lesser one at that.

This dialogue-free voyage into the unknown takes its inspiration from a spelunking mission in Calabria during the 1960s, as a close-knit crew roll up to a nearby village and then head out to the wilderness where they pitch up next to the Bifurto abyss – the third deepest sinkhole cave ever discovered. Frammartino captures the rag-tag team's derring do as – with jaw-droppingly lo-fi means – its members lower themselves deep into the Earth, using flaming news magazines as a way to see how deep the hole plunges. The film is a fond recreation of how this cave was discovered.

As this group cast their eyes on landscapes never before seen, a lone farmer sits on a hillside tending his herd and is suddenly struck down with illness. Frammartino draws heart breaking parallels with the veins of the earth being prized open up by these intrepid explorers, and the veins of the farmer which are being blocked and calcified by the ravages of time and age.

It's a magnificent piece of work, completely beguiling from end to end and one which wears its immense philosophical profundity with admirable lightness. In the spirit of its subject, the director offers us images of the like seldom seen in cinema, witheachslowrevealofacrepuscularundergroundantechamber or a stalactite-filled wall gifting us a feast for the senses and soft-spoken hymn to human endeavour and the transcendent, mysterious beauty of the natural world. **DAVID JENKINS**



Faya Dayi

Directed by **JESSICA BESHIR**
Starring **MURANO MLBB, KAWA SHERIF, SALIH SIGIRCI**
Released **24 JUNE**

Ethiopian legend tells of Azurkherlaini, an old Amir who, in order to conquer his fear, journeyed in search of Maoul Hayat – the water of eternal life. It's this tale that powers Jessica Beshir's *Faya Dayi,* a dreamlike docu-drama where ancient myth melds with harsh reality, making for a hauntingly beautiful portrait.

The Ethiopia of old has changed. Coffee crops have now been replaced with khat, a stimulant leaf that acts as a psychoactive drug. Initially discovered and used by the Sufi Imams as a means of elevating religious mediation, khat now forms Ethiopia's most lucrative cash crop. People of all ages chew the plant in order to reach Merkhana – a high that gifts a reprieve from the trials of everyday life. Through the khat trade, Beshir explores the Eastern town of Harar and deftly weaves a series of narratives that illustrate an environment where dreams of escape – both mental and physical – dominate the desires of many.

With the continued demand, farming khat has become a lifeline for many in the region to support themselves and their families, yet the temptations of succumbing to its hallucinatory qualities loom large. Meanwhile, long-standing political conflicts between the Oromo people and the government have led to their disenfranchisement, leaving many with little means of social mobility.

Faya Dayi unfolds entirely in black-and-white, as Beshir offers up imagery that is truly mesmerising Enigmatic shots of shadowy doorways and smoke lazily billowing out of a window endorse the mythic aspects of the story, while lingering shots of men sorting khat leaves before chewing aimlessly on the remains serve the social commentary. The film follows two separated lovers, a man yearning for a better life for Ethiopia's children, a boy who made it to Egypt only to return home for his mother, and a boy whose mother left him behind.

As if experiencing the noxious side-effects of a khat high, events in the film are hard to follow. Save for 14-year-old Mohammed, a boy with an addict father, many of the voices we hear or people we see are unnamed. Whisps of narrative are presented before moving on; we return to some figures and not to others. Yet the entrancing nature of the visuals keeps us engrossed, and quickly it becomes clear that a coherent view isn't the filmmaker's concern, and nor should it be the viewer's.

Beshir's decision to refrain from rushing to situate the viewer in a certain headspace can certainly be a barrier to fully engaging with *Faya Dayi*, but it also stands as its strength. There is an entirely straightforward way of making a docu-drama about this subject, yet Beshir's bold approach leaves much more of a lasting memory. **CHEYENNE BUNSIE**

ANTICIPATION. 4
A docu-drama hybrid written, directed and shot by a female Ethiopian filmmaker.

ENJOYMENT. 4
You'll have to work to initially process events... or maybe you don't hold onto them at all.

IN RETROSPECT. 4
Gorgeously made with stories and images that will endure long after viewing.

Futura

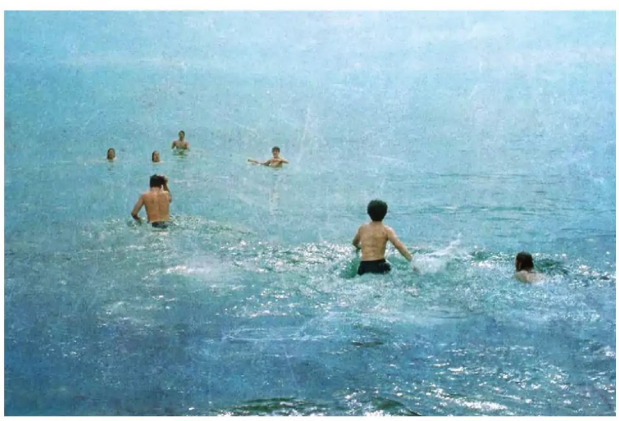
Directed by **PIETRO MARCELLO, FRANCESCO MUNZI, ALICE ROHRWACHER**

Released **8 JULY**

ANTICIPATION. 3
Italian teens do vox-pops. Moderately intriguing, but is it a movie?

ENJOYMENT. 4
An engaging amalgam of the insightful and the inane, captured pre- and post-pandemic.

IN RETROSPECT. 3
The visual grace notes linger in the memory, though is a more rigorous framework required?



In the autumn of 2020, a trio of Italian filmmakers traversed their country to take the emotional and psychological temperature of Italian adolescents. Those who were on the cusp of adulthood, what did they see ahead of them? What were their aspirations, their fears? If the directors could distract them from their phones long enough to offer an opinion. To be fair, the *ragazzi* at least make an effort to engage with the questions, as cameras encounter them in little clumps of student beauticians, farmers' kids, acting classes and so forth. Everywhere, responses hang in a sort of suspended ambivalence: they look forward to jobs and homes and families in the longer term, but imminent prospects are dismal. They might have to move within Italy to find employment. Going abroad could broaden their horizons, but who has the wherewithal? A worrying number suggest they could make it as professional footballers, others just want to work with the famous, and one ego-fuelled chancer expounds airily on his dreams of eco-friendly entrepreneurship. Bless. Well, they're just kids after all, though it's notable how resigned they seem to the status quo. Which is about to take a bit of a battering.

Shots of lonely individuals exercising on an urban rooftop tell you all you need to know about Italy's stringent lockdown, and when it's open again a year later, Marcello, Munzi and Rohrwacher are back on the road again. Now the kids are pretty bitter that they got a lot of the blame for Covid's spread, and after being cooped up for so long they're keen not to waste another minute. We see footage of youthful sit-ins and protests, but when the crew pitches up in Genoa, a film which has been reasonably absorbing but somewhat come-as-you-are thus far, suddenly acquires a sharper edge. It's 20 years since the 2001 G8 summit in the city, a carnival of anti-capitalist demonstrations turned very sour when riot police brutally laid into protesters inside a local school. What do today's lot think of those events? Turns out there might be a limit to how much they want to rattle the cage.

There's genuine tension in the air as the respondents feel a slightly goading tone from their interviewers, and it makes one wish there'd been a bit more confrontation elsewhere in the movie – like the argument that breaks out in the young offenders' unit between those for and against the abolition of money. Too often here it's the mouthy ones who get to hold court, which is to be expected, yet the Genoa sequence shows the dramatic dividends from a more focused approach. To some extent, there's a chance missed here, but the film is nevertheless swooningly shot on 16mm, which delivers some gorgeous atmos in Venice, Milan and Napoli, while giving the adolescents' faces a painterly presence throughout. Some still look like children, others old folks in the making, and whether beautiful or homely, all are lovingly preserved in this telling moment of possibility. **TREVOR JOHNSTON**

A Chiara

Directed by **JONAS CARPIGNANO**
Starring **SWAMY ROTOLO, CLAUDIO ROTOLO, GRECIA ROTOLO**
Released **15 JULY**

ANTICIPATION. 4
Keen to see this Directors' Fortnight award-winner from the 2021 Cannes Film Festival.

ENJOYMENT. 3
Impossible to suspend disbelief at the sight of a Nokia brick phone smashing.

IN RETROSPECT. 3
A solid film bolstered by its gripping central performance.

Just as Norway's Joachim Trier recently completed his Oslo trilogy with *The Worst Person in the World*, Jonas Carpignano has wrapped up his own Calabrian triptych with new film *A Chiara*. It's a unique addition to the well-trodden milieu of mafia thrillers, one whose originality is channelled through its Italian neorealist approach. As such, it's a film that brims with honesty as it exposes a complicated political landscape, as well as the challenges ordinary people are left to endure in the face of organised crime and government incompetence.

Carpignano's cast of non-professional actors is made up of the Rotolo family, and his ability to elicit such assured performances from them is especially remarkable with the added knowledge that they were working with a semi-improvised script. The story is centred on the titular Chiara (Swamy Rotolo) an inquisitive 15-year-old girl who is caught within a web of lies as she investigates her father's sudden disappearance, with the gulf between her and the rest of her family only expanding.

In this isolated process of unveiling deep family secrets and criminal ties all on her own, Chiara embarks on an unlikely journey towards self-discovery. It's an immaculate turn from Swamy Rotolo as she compellingly embodies both mature frustration and adolescent angst. Every muted reaction and every expressive outburst are heightened by the claustrophobic yet tactile visual language of Tim Curtin's distinct handheld cinematography.

The film opens with a party – a loose parallel to the opening scene of *The Godfather* – celebrating the 18th birthday of Chiara's older sister, Guilia (Grecia Rotolo). It's a wholesome affair, with friends and extended family members playing games, making toasts and dancing to a corny Ed Sheeran song. These are the last moments we get to see the family united as, later that night, Claudio (Claudio Rotolo), the patriarch, disappears following a car explosion.

Unfolding within a rather bloated two-hour runtime is a narrative that often falls into the trap of banal dialogue ("They call it mafia, we call it survival.") and an aura of moralism that undermines the poignancy of its superior first half. Chiara is often faced with obstacles that feel manufactured and thrown in for the sole purpose of keeping her at a crossroads.

Lived-in naturalism creeps in as the camera is constantly kept at arm's length. At its most effective, this style enhances the honesty, intimacy and intensity that guides the riveting narrative. Yet as the film progresses, it elicits a rather unwelcoming distance and impatience that make it difficult to remain totally immersed. Adequately high stakes are replaced with a drawn-out second half that struggles to sustain momentum and compromises the payoff as it feigns unnecessary dramatic tension.

MARINA ASHIOTI

DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2021
"It's as if we're watching a Persian *Little Miss Sunshine*"
The Hollywood Reporter
WINNER BEST FILM AWARD BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL 2021
OFFICIAL SELECTION NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL 2021
"A truly outstanding debut"
OFFICIAL SELECTION DUBLIN FILM FESTIVAL 2021
★★★★★ CineVue
HIT THE ROAD
A film by PANAH PANAHI
EXCLUSIVELY IN CINEMAS 29 JULY
HITTHEROAD.FILM
©JP Film Production, 2021

Brian and Charles

Directed by **JIM ARCHER**
Starring **DAVID EARL, CHRIS HAYWARD, LOUISE BREALEY**
Released **8 JULY**

ANTICIPATION. 3
This went down well at Sundance but might be too kooky for its own good.

ENJOYMENT. 3
Slight but sweet and often laugh-out-loud funny.

IN RETROSPECT. 3
Doesn't quite justify feature length but it's hard to resist a seven foot tall robot in a hula skirt.

A crowd-pleaser at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival, *Brian and Charles* will perhaps test the patience of anyone with an allergy to all things twee. *Harold and Maude* meets *Wallace and Gromit* starring a robot who loves cabbages might sound unbearably quirky, but there's much to enjoy in this funny, small-scale fable about self-discovery and letting go. Brian (David Earl), an affable and odd amateur inventor, is holed up in a cottage in the wintry Welsh countryside. Initially, director Jim Archer employs a mockumentary style as Brian demonstrates his eccentric creations direct to camera, such as a belt to store hard boiled eggs and a regrettably flammable flying cuckoo clock.

To stave off loneliness, Brian constructs 'Charles Petrescu', a seven feet tall robot voiced and operated by a wonderfully deadpan Chris Hayward. He looks like Albert Einstein struggling to digest a washing machine: a curly grey wig and glasses are perched on a shop dummy's head which itself sits on an enormous boxy chest. He's remarkably expressive, with every shuffle and head swivel exquisitely timed.

At first, Charles is dependent on his creator who fusses over him like an overprotective parent, but eventually dreams of adventures beyond his Welsh hillside home. Writers Archer, Earl and Hayward certainly mine the humorous potential of a robotic voice saying unlikely phrases, and it undeniably works as Charles matures from child to adult via adolescent stroppiness. It's hard to resist Charles calling his creator/surrogate father a "bossyboots" and insisting that he gets to sit in the front of Brian's car. There's also a wonderful Monty Python-esque touch to Charles' flat line delivery (though perhaps that's just because he repeats the name Brian endlessly).

The film is expanded from a 2017 short, and, unfortunately, it shows as the mechanics of the plot don't quite work. Brian's budding romance with another local oddball played by Sherlock's Louise Brealey is conveniently cutesy, and the final third creaks as the village's local bully (notably the only character with a Welsh accent in a Welsh village) becomes an unconvincing antagonist. The mockumentary form, carried over from the short, is also redundant after the first ten minutes or so, and seems like an afterthought rather than a conscious choice.

And yet, despite its occasional treacliness, the film does have a melancholic undertone. Comedian David Earl, longtime Ricky Gervais collaborator, has been performing as different versions of Brian for years. Here, Brian is clearly a deeply sad and desperate recluse, though we are not privy to any backstory. The location is beautiful but bleak, and the fact that it was shot in December 2020 acts as a stark reminder to those people who may have been left behind by the isolation of the pandemic.

Rather like its robotic protagonist, *Brian and Charles* is bolted together from misshapen parts that don't constitute an altogether successful whole. But, anchored by a strong but understated performance from Earl, it's awkward but ultimately endearing, and hopefully this isn't the last we see of Charles Petrescu. **LAURA VENNING**

Swan Song

Directed by **TODD STEPHENS**
Starring **UDO KIER, JENNIFER COOLIDGE, ERIC EISENBREY**
Released **10 JUNE**

ANTICIPATION. 4
Udo Kier finally gets the leading man role he's always deserved.

ENJOYMENT. 4
With its warmth and humour, this is Todd Stephens most mature film to date.

IN RETROSPECT. 4
A poised Kier masters his turn as an older gay man facing up to his past.

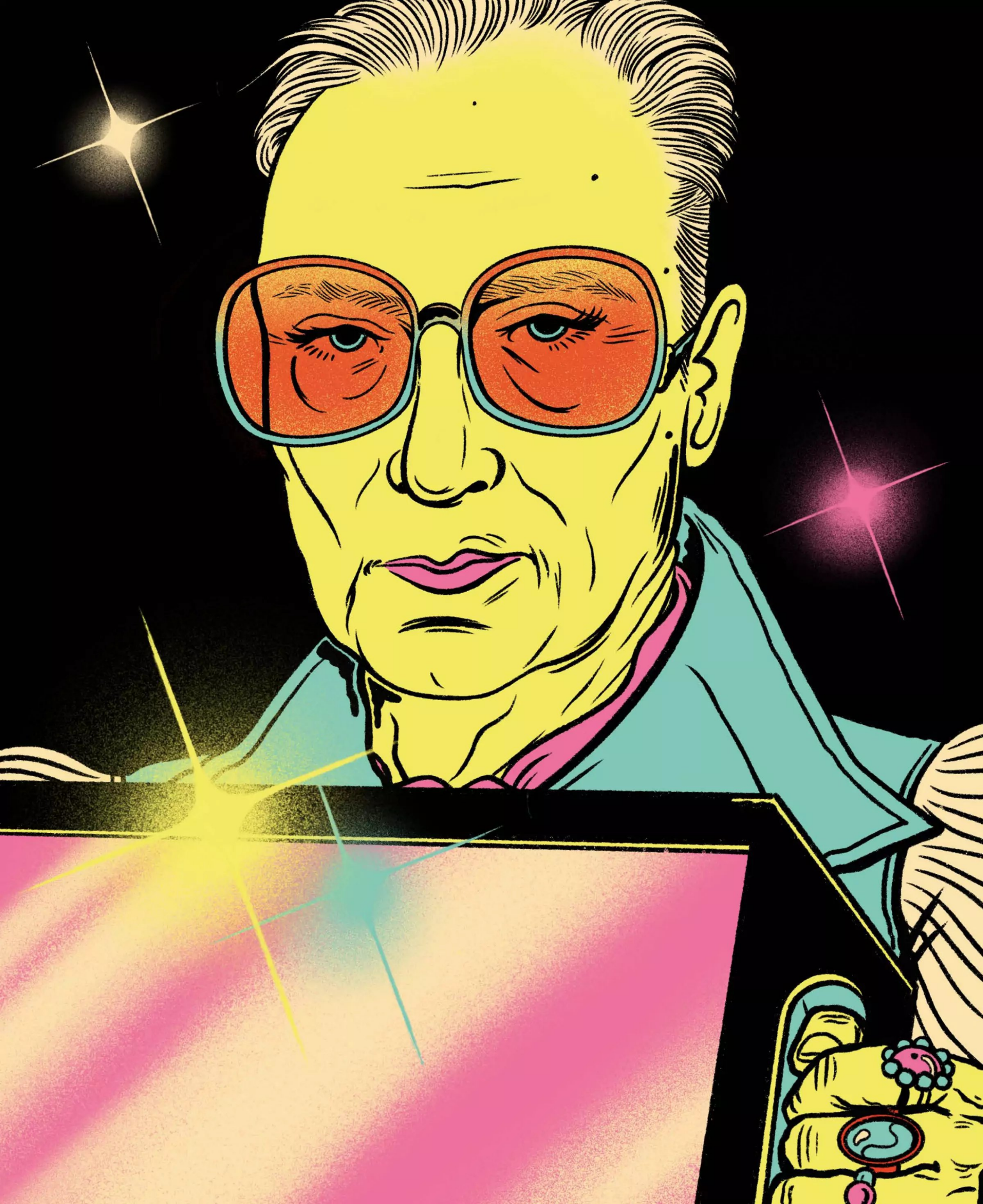
Udo Kier steps into the spotlight of an empty theatre in the opening moments of *Swan Song*, his all-white outfit and chunk rings glistening as he professes: "I'm back." The sentiment is certainly true for the 77-year-old cult actor who is placed centre stage in Todd Stephens' bittersweet comedy-drama. This is a long-awaited leading role for Kier, whose appearances in the likes of *My Own Private Idaho*, *Blood For Dracula* and the 1977 *Suspiria* have brandished the well-versed actor as a screen icon.

Swan Song relies heavily on Kier's transfixing presence. He plays Pat Pitsenbarger, a retired stylist of socialites who is wasting away in a dreary nursing home that is dulling his shine. He spends his days folding handkerchiefs with intermittent cigarette breaks to tame his wandering mind. This peace is interrupted when a lawyer arrives with the request to style a client one last time: a final funeral farewell hairdo. Initially spitting "bury her with bad hair," the $25,000 paycheque has him coming around to the idea, and Pat sets off on a cross country trip to source beauty supplies. In this sentimental story of reflection and glossy odyssey, he confronts his anguish and lays the ghosts of his past to rest.

Pat struts through the small town he once knew but no longer recognises. Many residents, however, remember him, from locals who still fondly recall when he styled their hair to hairdressers who work in the shadow of his revered career. In his hunt for styling products long discounted, Pat resorts to former student turned beauty competitor, Dee Dee Dale's (Jennifer Coolidge) Ohio salon. A catfight between the pair breaks out which proves Coolidge and Kier a superbly balanced pair. The two pros spar in a battle of who can throw the sassiest insults, dramatics exploding like homemade fireworks.

Pat's greatest hits tour also includes visiting his late husband David's (Eric Eisenbrey) grave – who appears in wistful flashbacks that Pat walks through. Also, a trip to the soon-to-shut local gay bar reflects on being queer in a small town and how time greatly alters that lived experience. When Stephens' script occasionally trips up on these entangled narrative threads, Kier's immaculately polished performance tightens the reigns as his expression expertly flits between haunted melancholy and stoic bravado to capture Pat's regret and potential forgiveness.

The most memorable sequence is a toss-up between Pat in drag energetically lip-syncing to Robyn's melancholic anthem 'Dancing on My Own' while wearing a chandelier headpiece like a crown and Pat in a pastel mint green wide-leg pantsuit holding up traffic as he drives his mobility scooter in the middle of a road. Both moments project persona with no need for dialogue. Paying homage to a true hometown pioneer, Stephens' portrait of a gentleman who knows how to be nothing but entirely himself is a compassionate and colourful character study. **EMILY MASKELL**



Interview by **ANNA BOGUTSKAYA** *Illustration by* **FIONA MCDONNELL**

Udo Kier

The legendary German bit player on planting palm trees, Liberace's rings, and his (lead!) role as an ageing hair stylist in Todd Stephens's Swan Song.

It takes three tries to get this interview on the road. First, it gets rescheduled. Then, it gets cancelled. Then, as I'm dialling Udo Kier's hotel room, his hotel gets evacuated. Finally, we get to speak on the phone about one of his most widely-acclaimed roles to date, that of a flamboyant retired hair-dresser in *Swan Song*. Despite having worked with Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Gus Van Sant and Lars von Trier, as well as having appeared in literally hundreds of films spanning arthouse and blockbusters alike, Kier hasn't had a leading role since Andy Warhol's 1974 *Blood for Dracula*. In writer/director Todd Stephens' tender ode to his hometown of Sandusky, Ohio and the local celebrity hairdresser Mr Pat, Kier gets the chance to be centre stage.

LWLies: Let's start at the beginning: what did you make of Todd Stephens when you met him and the role of Pat when it was presented to you? Kier: Because it's such an intimate script, I had to know the director and the way he thinks about it. He came and visited me and we spent an afternoon together in Palm Springs, where I live in a former library. I said, 'Okay, I will play it. But please, no clichés.' I told him that I would like to live for two days in a retirement home on my own. No camera, no director, just me with elderly people being together and that I want to shoot chronologically. On a low budget film it's much easier to shoot chronologically than on a big studio film. What I found interesting was that it was a trip back to the past – my past – of not being crazy and waving my arms.

Does your approach to a role change when you're carrying the entire film? No. I already said no to a couple of movies. Because it was again the guest part. So, I have to see what's coming. Maybe I will play William Burroughs. I'm in Berlin now shooting a series. It's a small role, but I like to work and I cannot sit at home. If I wasn't an actor I would be a gardener because I be in big places. And I have in one place 100 palm trees which I planted myself and they were small, now, they're at least 15 feet.

What did you do that helped you prepare to get into Pat? What I did was try not to act, which is very difficult. Todd told me about a few friends of the real Pat that are still alive and I wanted to meet them. So, we had an evening together and they showed me how Pat – the real Pat – would hold his cigarette, how he moved. There wasn't any fantasy. Everybody in Sandusky helped. It became a studio, and everybody wanted to help Todd to make that film, so we could basically shoot wherever we wanted to.

It felt like Pat gets dressed throughout the movie, with the green suit, the rings, the hat – and by the end of it he becomes fully himself. How important was the costume? In Las Vegas many, many years ago, I saw Liberace, who had his hand up full of diamonds and rings. Before he played the piano, he showed his hands to the audience. And he said, 'You paid for it.' I didn't want to imitate him, but I just said, "I'm back." I got from Pat's living friends that he was a famous person in that little town. That green suit became like a uniform. I had that suit and the little hat on from the moment I entered the town.

One of the things that really stood out to me from *Swan Song* is the legacy of Pat's generation on the town of Sandusky and on other gay men that came after him. Do you ever think about your own legacy in cinema, having done so much? I have no time to think about it. There will be a time. I'm 77 now and there will be a time in the next couple of years where I won't be making so many movies anymore unless David Lynch or somebody calls me. I was supposed to make a film with Abel Ferrara but I didn't have time, which means I will work with him one day. I have never in my life said to a director, 'I would like to work with you'. I had dinner with David Lynch and Terrence Malick, but I only say, 'I like your movies'. And that's enough. Imagine, imagine you say to David Lynch, 'I would like to work with you,' and he would answer 'Who doesn't?' I would crawl under the table.

Is there any director that you would break that rule for? Maybe after a few glasses of Chardonnay, to Almodóvar

Theo and the Metamorphosis

Directed by **DAMIEN ODOUL**
Starring **THEO KERMEL, PIERRE MEUNIER, SONIA GONDRY**
Released **24 JUNE**

ANTICIPATION.
A 2021 Berlin Film Festival selection with a potentially interesting narrative. **3**

ENJOYMENT.
Intriguing in parts but difficult to fully grasp. **3**

IN RETROSPECT.
The "mystical disability trope" at play here ultimately clouds the overall appeal. **2**

There is something Ulyssian about Damien Odoul's ninth feature film *Theo and the Metamorphosis*. Much like Joyce's epic in its wandering narrative progression and general opaqueness, the film is a one-man odyssey: over the course of a day, hero Theo (Theo Kermel, an actor with Down's syndrome), who goes by TO, encounters family, friends, strange visions and memories in the depths of a French forest.

TO, in his late twenties, lives with his father (Pierre Meunier) in an isolated wooden cottage, all *Grand Designs* rustic chicness and modern touches. Their daily life is divided between the chores of chopping wood, gathering materials and animalistic play-fighting that hovers on the border of fun and genuine violence. His father is a photographer and wannabe lumberjack. He also seems to be teaching TO martial arts with the aim of making him a "peaceful warrior." Such is the variety and undeniable wackiness of Odoul's film which defies easy definition. There's observational documentary camerawork at play, coupled with a surrealist fantasy aesthetic, while TO's voiceover adds a poetic tone and interior reflection on his Down's syndrome, his relationship with his father and his artistic pursuits.

All of this combines to create an enigmatic portrait of a young man that withholds slightly too much from the viewer to feel truly engaging. When TO's father leaves for an exhibition of his work, the protagonist is left to fend for himself in sometimes delightful ways – figuring out how he can play table tennis by himself, for example. There are more cryptic means, too: a pet snake becomes an empress who helps TO transform into a serpent-woman, then a ninja emerges in the forest to fight him.

But, overall, is this really anything more than the so-called "mystical disability trope" on full display? Odoul paints TO as a powerfully magic being, dancing around the forest and becoming one with the elements. While there is a playfulness to this in the film, it leans towards Othering its lead – and by extension people with disabilities – as somehow being unknown, different, set apart. This is not to say that films about disabled people need to focus on their condition or present it in a grimly social realist light. The sad reality is that cinema has yet to truly offer equal opportunities to all people of different abilities, and that means there are so few depictions of disabled people living ordinary lives, and therefore applying either the "mystical" or "damaged" cliché can be equally troubling. Even as TO's quest revolves around personal freedom, individuality, and reaching a quasi-enlightenment, there is a conflict between his agency and the film's metaphysical tone.

There are small moments of intrigue and beauty, but these are clouded by the general sense of concern over the film's handling of TO's Down's syndrome as its central conceit. Not only does TO begin to feel alienated, the stream-of-consciousness style and wild ideas thrown into the mix serve to create a further distance in understanding. There is the sense that a touch more cohesion and structure could have elevated this to something more interesting. **CAITLIN QUINLAN**

Nitram

Directed by **JUSTIN KURZEL**
Starring **CALEB LANDRY JONES, JUDY DAVIS, ANTHONY LAPAGLIA**
Released **1 JULY**

ANTICIPATION. 4
Australia's Justin Kurzel returns to true crime territory.

ENJOYMENT. 2
Atmospheric and well acted, but to what end?

IN RETROSPECT. 2
Another frustrating endeavour to empathetically tell a killer's story.

Justin Kurzel is quickly becoming the foremost cinematic chronicler of Australian true crime. Having kicked off his directing career in 2011 with *Snowtown*, recalling the series of murders committed in and around Adelaide in the 1990s, he covered the exploits of outlaw Ned Kelly in his last feature, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, in 2019.

His fifth film, *Nitram*, returns to this territory by centring on the '96 Port Arthur massacre – the worst mass shooting in Australian history. It saw 35 people killed and a further 23 injured, and Martin Bryant, who carried out the attack, was sentenced to 35 life sentences without the possibility of parole. Kurzel reteams with screenwriter Shaun Grant, who also wrote the screenplays for *Snowtown* and *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Caleb Landry Jones is "Nitram" (Martin backwards) with a surprisingly good Australian accent, while Judy Davis and Anthony LaPaglia play his concerned but loving parents. Tracking Nitram over an unknown period, we witness as he forms a close relationship with wealthy misfit Helen (Essie Davis), only to suffer a series of tragedies that send him down the path of destruction.

The problem with *Nitram* is the problem with true crime more generally since the genre exploded in popularity: the focus continues to be on the perpetrators of these horrific crimes rather than their victims. These people remain anonymous, almost an afterthought, as Kurzel and Grant are so intent on portraying the human face of the massacre. The team go to great lengths to show Nitram as a lonely, awkward soul whose predilection towards fireworks and firearms are concerning but ultimately balanced by his love of animals and the devastation he suffers when he loses his best friend and father in quick succession. It's clear that the intention is to humanise Bryant, to highlight that monsters can come from anywhere, but this feels like a path filmmakers have trodden time and time before, from 1968's *The Boston Strangler* to 2017's *My Friend Dahmer*.

The film also overemphasises Nitram's difficult relationship with his mother, as if her stern nature was integral to his decision to commit such an act. The link between psychopathy and "mommy issues" is inherently flawed and more than a little misogynistic, especially given that Nitram's father is portrayed in a much more favourable light. Full credit to Davis, though, who does her best to bring life to a thinly-sketched character. What purpose does it really serve to remind audiences that monsters live among us? It's a message that's forced on us on a near daily basis. Not a single one of Bryant's victims is named in the film, and while a title card at the end explains how attempts to reform Australian gun control have ultimately been unsuccessful, Kurzel offers no answers as to why. Although the film avoids depicting any act of violence (aside from that which Nitram inflicts on his father and a shooting we hear but don't see) its sympathies seem strangely weighted in favour of a man who showed none to the people he murdered. **HANNAH STRONG**

Earwig

Directed by **LUCILE HADŽIHALILOVIĆ**
Starring **PAUL HILTON, ROMANE HEMELAERS, ALEX LAWTHER**
Released **10 JUNE**

ANTICIPATION. 4
After Evolution, *I'll watch anything with Lucile Hadžihalilović's fingerprints on it.*

ENJOYMENT. 3
Bizarre, sensual, but sometimes too knotty for its own good.

IN RETROSPECT. 3
Marks an emotional departure from the director while preserving her befuddling MO.

It would be reductive, though not untrue, to say that Lucile Hadžihalilović enjoys disturbing her audience. Her first two features, *Innocence* and *Evolution*, are slow-moving (often cruelly so) and plaited with enough obscurity and body horror to send bile inching up viewers' throats. But her aim, as further evidenced by *Earwig*, is to disorient her audience, not simply frighten them. This generous adaptation of Brian Catling's novella of the same name sees Aalbert Scellinc (Paul Hilton), a stoic middle-aged man in postwar Europe, caring for 10-year-old shut-in Mia (Romane Hemelaers). Their exact relationship is unspecified; he carries out tasks for her, the most critical and bizarre being tending to her ice dentures, which need to be changed frequently and with caution.

Vials fastened to elaborate headgear collect saliva from Mia's mouth, which is subsequently poured into a mould of her teeth and sealed inside a freezer. Once solid, Aalbert gingerly fixes the dentures to her gums, as though manoeuvering a tripwire. Mia flashes a translucent smile and their cycle looks set to continue. That is, until the stern, nameless "master" that phones intermittently to inquire about Mia's teeth, dispensing instructions on her care and Aalbert's compensation, informs him that he must prepare her to leave their apartment.

This is familiar territory for Hadžihalilović, whose work consistently surveys cloistered children, their caretakers and the ominous higher-ups who direct them. Unlike her earlier films, however, which attend to preadolescents, *Earwig* is more concerned with Mia's keeper than Mia herself. "It's not the story of the little girl, but of the 50-year-old who looks after her," says Hadžihalilović in an introductory message to the film.

Indeed, it is the eponymous Aalbert – nicknamed "Earwig" in the novella – who eats away at the runtime. Hilton's performance shifts between restrained caretaker-cum-widower and overwrought instigator with apparent ease. His anxieties are underscored by Ken Yasumoto and Bruno Schweisguth's chilling sound design, made up of dripping saliva, tinnitic ringing and the violent hum of wine glass rims.

And yet the novelty of Hadžihalilović's unorthodox set-up dwindles with every unturned stone. New characters crop up, each with coiled motivations, seeking answers to questions never asked. The most visually emboldened sequences – light refracting off of crystalware, spinning colour into an otherwise sooty milieu – offer little narrative insight. The film's last-gasp reveal is superbly realised, but clouded by a desire to cling on to more.

Hadžihalilović's slow, contemplative style begins to fold into itself, dodging riposte by embracing aloofness. *Earwig* consciously lacks the clarity we're taught to ultimately expect from mysteries – but then Hadžihalilović is not in the business of making clear-cut whodunits. In opting to take a less-trodden path, she creates something sensuously distinct but narratively ambivalent. A positively disorienting film, if not always for the right reasons. **SAFFRON MAEVE**

Elvis

Directed by **BAZ LUHRMANN**
Starring **AUSTIN BUTLER, TOM HANKS, OLIVIA DEJONGE**
Released **24 JUNE**

No one does tacky opulence quite like Baz Luhrmann. He and Elvis Presley – the King of rock 'n' roll and he of the bedazzled jumpsuit – is surely a match made in garish heaven. This biographical film doesn't show us the full scope of Elvis' life, work and unprecedented influence on American culture. Instead, it opts to give the fairy tale version.

After a whistle-stop tour through the early influences that would forever mark the life of Elvis Aaron Presley – an impoverished upbringing, a devotion to his momma, the lifelong influence of Black music – we are teased glimpses of the man who would become the King: a forearm; a magenta suit; a jet-black strand of hair; a snippet of a baritone Memphis drawl. Onstage, he came alive, his dripping sex appeal merged with a Southern good-boy naivety that made audiences go feral for decades.

Former child star Austin Butler plays Elvis with the sincere intensity of someone trying very hard to be taken seriously. The film takes a great pains to show the physical exertion of performing: tensing; thrusting; dripping with sweat; the promise of a good time after the curtain falls. Butler gets the moves, the voice and – most importantly – Elvis' charisma down.

Whatever flaws the film has, Butler's Elvis is mesmeric. While the film makes a big deal out of the star's sex appeal, his "lewd gyrations and jerky movements" that made women go gaga, Elvis here is all smooth-corners. There is no room for exploring the contradictions, the thorniness of his relationship with a teenage Priscilla, his infidelities, politics, or drug abuse. Anything that would make Elvis unappealing or problematic by modern standards is taken out of the frame.

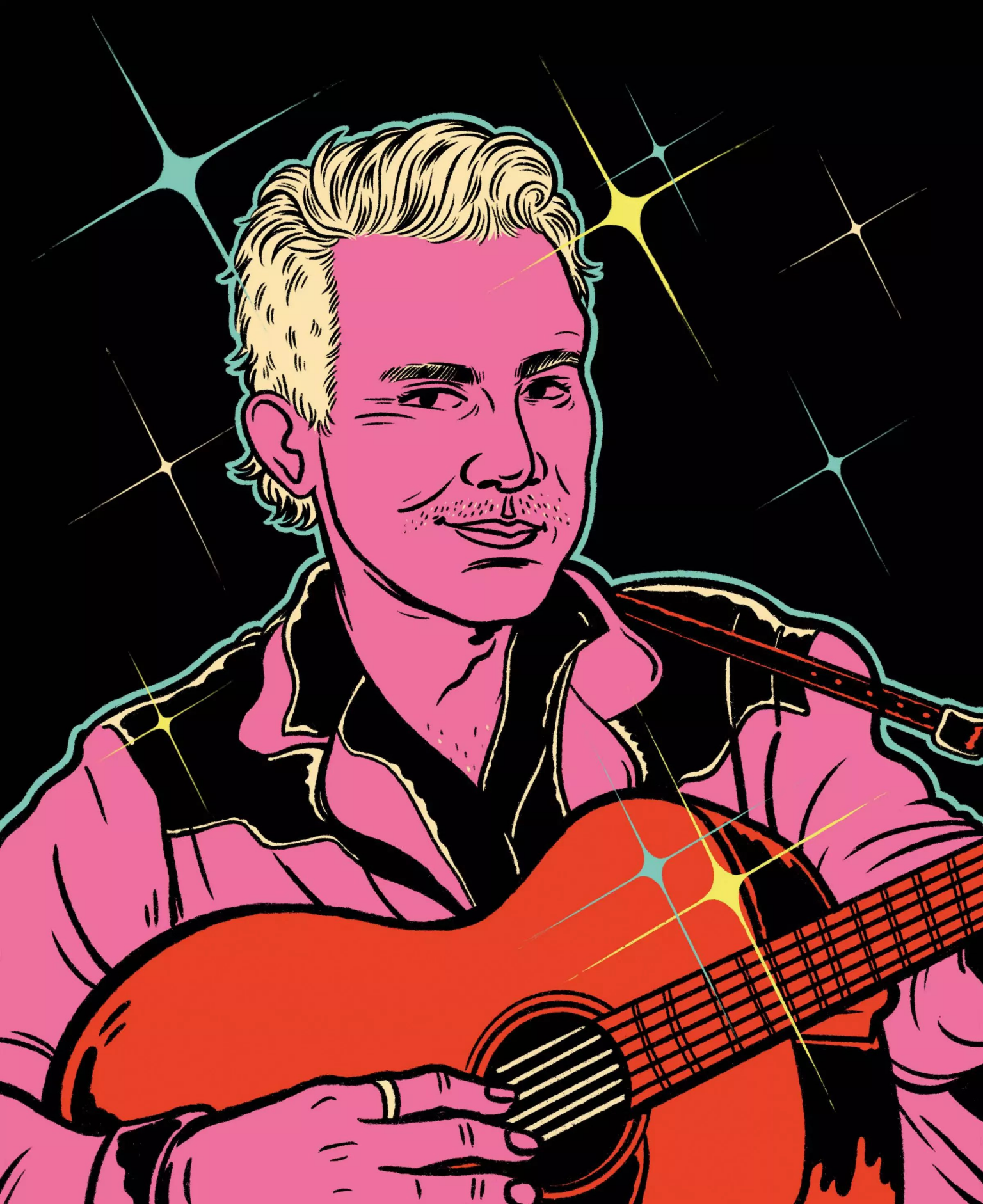
Through dizzying multi-split-screen montages the film whizzes through the details of Elvis' ascendancy into the mainstream. Every fairytale needs a villain, and for Elvis, it's his leeching long-time manager, Colonel Tom Parker, played as an eyebrow-arching cartoon villain by Tom Hanks encased in prosthetics. The parasitic relationship between the artist and the manager – the former too naive to see he was being swindled and the latter a corny Svengali milking the Presley cash cow to cover up his own debts – is too categorical to say anything substantial about the dirty dealings of the music business beyond Parker's deluded platitudes and faux-fatherly manipulations of Elvis.

We're spared Elvis' decline into a bloated, sweaty crooner – that would ruin the fairy tale. Riddled with debt, Elvis reluctantly continues performing in the mausoleum of a Vegas hotel until his death. There are infinite ways to approach a cultural juggernaut like Presley. Luhrmann rewrites him as a victim of the Colonel's greed and his own success, a good boy aching to do well by others and always coming up short. **ANNA BOGUTSKAYA**

ANTICIPATION. *The hottest ticket in at the 2022 Cannes Film Fesival.* **5**

ENJOYMENT. *Sparkles, wiggles and crotch shots are a great combo.* **5**

IN RETROSPECT. *Surface-level take on The King, but a great time nonetheless.* **4**



Interview by **ELLA KEMP** *Illustration by* **FIONA MCDONNELL**

Baz Luhrmann

Australia's self-styled "tragic romantic" on how he brought the life of Elvis Aaron Presley to the screen in the biggest way possible.

The story of Baz Luhrmann and Elvis Presley feels like it was written in the stars. Two small-town boys who shot to fame in a world ready to eat them alive, making a name for themselves under blinding lights and surrounded by clamouring fans. Luhrmann brings the King of Rock 'n' Roll's story to the screen with expected pathos and surprising tragedy – far from a biopic, it is a story of a boy (here thoughtfully played by Austin Butler and mentored and terrorised by Tom Hanks' Colonel Tom Parker) who took over the world.

LWLies: With *The Great Gatsby* you made a portrait of one of the sacred American texts of the 20th century, which you're now following up with a profile of the quintessential icon of the 20th century in America. Could you talk about your interest in chronicling these masterpieces and icons in American art? Elvis was a white sheet of paper, a platform on which to explore America in the '50s, '60s and '70s, through the prism of these two big gestures. One is Elvis which represents the invention of the new: it's a very diverse country that's all jumbled up, and out of that jumble, new things come. On the other hand, you have Colonel Tom Parker. There's a thing in America called 'the sell,' and they're really good at promoting ideas.

I'm fascinated by the American era, which is just transitioning. I always think about the Ancient Greeks. Athens was an oil power. They were the great dominant power, but they only invented democracy and the really cool stuff as they were declining. I don't think America will decline, because they're not running around trying to be all-powerful. I see some of the better days of American culture ahead of us.

As you continue to grapple with pop culture, something that struck me about *Elvis* is the voraciousness of fandom. You're on to something. In my organisation, there's a lot of different generations and a lot of young people. The first thing they go to is the perils of fame, and it's absolutely because of social media. The fame I see around young music producers and social media influencers with 80 million followers is not the same I see around Leo [DiCaprio]. It's so instant.

That kind of instant fame is terrifying. It reminded me of your other films: this urgency of destiny, the frailty of life and the inevitability of tragedy. I used to hate being pigeonholed as the romantic guy, but I think I am a tragic romantic. And now I'm old enough to realise I can't make a movie or do anything unless I'm walking this razor's edge of romanticism and tragedy. Like Elvis, growing up in an extremely tiny town, I was isolated. I had an obviously pretty active imagination, and I now verbalise it with people who are much better at things than I am. But I cannot do it unless I'm in an environment that is romantic. That's why I create worlds not just on the screen but around me. I lived *Elvis*. With *Gatsby*, I kind of lived like Fitzgerald.

Austin Butler said he was going to sing 'Love Me Tender' for his audition and went for 'Unchained Melody' instead. What about that choice worked for you? A strange video turned up with this young guy playing the piano in a flood of tears singing 'Unchained Melody' like he was going to maybe die. He got up in the middle of the night and sang it. There were so many spiritual reasons Austin was drawn to the role. Not the least of which is that he lost his mother at exactly the same age that Elvis did. There was a kinship. I also got a call from Denzel Washington, who I do not know, who said, 'I've just been on stage with this young man who has the greatest work ethic of any actor I've ever seen. He just does not stop.'

Even when we were shut down, there wasn't a minute Austin wasn't listening to Elvis. I know so much about Elvis, but nobody knows as much as Austin. What's happening in real time as I speak to you, it's like what happened with Leo on *Romeo + Juliet*. It's not just screaming girls. It's a particular sound. They call it keening.

Finally, what is your favourite film Elvis acted in? Oh, that's easy. *King Creole*. Towards the end of his life, he says to Priscilla, 'I'm almost 40 and I'll never be remembered for anything. I've never made that serious film I always wanted to.' He always wanted a great acting role, and in that he's got real potential – he's a true street punk

Hit the Road

Directed by **PANAH PANAHI**
Starring **PANTEA PANAHIHA, HASAN MAJUNI, AMIN SIMIAR**
Released **29 JULY**

ANTICIPATION.
Does Panahi Jr have something unique in store? **3**

ENJOYMENT.
Wholly compelling and with dashes of Iranian New Wave lyricism. Plus a very excellent dog. **4**

IN RETROSPECT.
A big win for nepotism. **4**

Nothing says Iranian New Wave like cramped road trips, mesmerising wide shots, long takes, a leisurely pace, child actors and deceptively low narrative stakes that escalate into much more complicated conundrums. While containing all the ingredients mentioned above, Panah Panahi's beautifully-crafted debut feature is compositionally robust, with phenomenal camerawork, grading and blocking to boot. The film's political agenda and overall critique of the predicaments of Iranian society and politics remain elusive enough as to be able to circumvent the stringent auspices of government censors. In this affecting film, Panahi's use of dramatic space firmly places him within the movement that his father – the great Jafar Panahi – is revered for. The stylistic and narrative influence of his father, as well as his mentor Abbas Kiarostami, are both palpable.

Hit the Road opens *in media res* and keeps its impetus ambiguous throughout. We follow a family driving down a long desert highway with nostalgic '70s-era Iranian pop music providing the soundtrack to their journey. We learn that they have sold their home and have left everything behind – all except their ailing dog Jessie, who joins them on the trip. Their journey is set to culminate in an attempt to smuggle their eldest son, Farid (Amin Simiar), out of Iran. The constantly upbeat younger son (Rayan Sarlak) remains completely oblivious to the situation, and exudes a manic energy that's equal parts grating and delightful. At no point are we promised any resolution, or given any clear indication as to why this journey has to take place. We remain merely one step ahead of the naive younger son. All we have is a glimpse into a family on the precipice of something that's underpinned by a lurking trepidation. We're left to guess what that unseen something is, who these people are and where exactly they're going. Yet Panah's film aptly draws intimacy from meandering conversations and generates suspense from the seemingly mundane, while it maintains an aura of surreal whimsy through its constant recourse to irreverent humour.

To retain the secrets of the plot and make the film experience as compelling as possible, Panahi deftly oscillates between sardonic humour and engrossing tragedy, successfully eluding any narrative frustration. The film's tender emotional core is its greatest asset, which is enhanced by inventive tonal shifts and complemented by incredibly fleshed out characters, a uniformly brilliant cast and naturalistic dialogue that keeps it from lurching into the terrain of sterile realism. Panahi even weaves in a heartfelt sequence of magical realism prompted by a (non-spoiler friendly) discussion on *2001: A Space Odyssey* between the father (Hasan Majuni) and younger son, who are framed lying on the grass, which slowly transforms into a starry night's sky.

MARINA ASHIOTI

Good Luck to You, Leo Grande

Directed by **SOPHIE HYDE**
Starring **EMMA THOMPSON, DARYL MCCORMACK, ISABELLA LAUGHLAND**
Released **17 JUNE**

Emma Thompson plays to her formidable strengths as Nancy, a caustic but kind RE teacher, recently widowed, who has lived a sexually-unfulfilled existence. She has never orgasmed, given or received oral sex or even attempted a position beyond dutiful missionary with her "boring" ex-husband. Now freed from her matrimonial bonds she hires Leo Grande so she can finally experience some of the sexual exhilaration that has long eluded her. Sophie Hyde's *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* charts Nancy's voyage of sexual and self-discovery across a series of meeting the two have at a chic hotel.

Leo has an almost angelic presence as an insightful, warm man who loves his job. Where Nancy worries she has hired a "sex-trafficked orphan", instead she finds an empowered and erudite young man, and the two engage in a witty repartee. While Thompson handling zingy dialogue with emotional crescendos is no surprise, Daryl McCormack as Leo, meets, and occasionally exceeds her. He's a more calm figure, and has walls of professionalism around him, strictly adhering to a code of behaviour while gently rebuffing Nancy's presumptions around him. The confines of the hotel room give Nancy permission to become pure id, yet McCormack has the challenge of retaining a consummate professionalism while still allowing some of Nancy's crueller words cut through.

While keeping to the confines of a single suite has "Covid filming restrictions" written all over it, the limited location also give the film an almost sci-fi veneer with our two leads disconnected from the outside world, neither using their own name. The passage of time feels elastic. The two talk openly about motherhood, sex work, education and body-image with a natural zippiness, Katy Brand's script makes the progress through such hot button topics seamless. The chemistry between the two, the gentle teasing and unexhibited dancing that slowly melts into the sex is utterly delicious. Nancy shocks herself by hiring Leo Grande in the first place that, yet the fact she continues to go back to him feels entirely earned.

Both Leo Grande and director Hyde's focus is on Nancy's pleasure, be it enjoying being eaten out with aplomb or tracing her hands across a muscular chest. It's a joy to see a bona fide national treasure like Thompson confidently naked on screen and presented as an object of desire at 62. While its not a sugar-coated fairytale and the film veers off the path "sex sainthood" with boundaries being crossed and Oedipal undertones acknowledged, the film is still best at its sweetest. The story focuses on the mutual gratification the protagonists provide each other, and how two imperfect humans meeting can prove a shared antidote for worldly ills. **LEILA LATIF**

ANTICIPATION. 4
There's something irresistible about a title this silly.

ENJOYMENT. 4
Come for the sex positivity, stay for the sexual chemistry.

IN RETROSPECT. 4
Two fantastic performances and some non-icky sexual politics.

Interview by **STEPH GREEN** *Illustration by* **FIONA MCDONNELL**

Daryl McCormack

The Irish actor chats screen representations of sex workers, sex positivity and his breakout role in Good Luck to You, Leo Grande.

Good Luck to You, Leo Grande is a British sex comedy with a difference: an intimate two-hander that reels in laughs before ruminating on the importance of sexual pleasure and body confidence. Daryl McCormack's Connor, a sex worker operating under the alias Leo Grande for Emma Thompson's Nancy, possesses a charming, understated power in a performance that positions him on the brink of stardom.

LWLies: Male sex work in cinema is often, predominantly, only seen in crime films like *Midnight Cowboy* and *American Gigolo*. The exploration here is quite different, refreshingly so. McCormack: I do think there's a really healthy representation of a sex worker in this film. That was in the heart of Sophie [Hyde]'s vision, and in Katy Brand's script – that's what felt instantly different to me. In my prep, I kept myself away from some of those stereotypical representations that we've already seen, because I knew it wouldn't help with regards to playing Leo. Instead, we spoke to a handful of sex workers in conversations set up by Sophie. I really wanted to meet these real people, and take some of the essence of their own sense of authority over themselves, and the journey that they went on with regards to sex work. Hopefully, some of them do see the film, and feel proud in some sense. But I never wanted to put the weight of representing sex workers on my shoulders. Because, you know, there is such a vast spectrum of sex work. You can't just encapsulate it in one single person. I needed to make sure that I put that pressure off myself. There were also elements of writing and even fiction that I read up on about intimacy, and that was more or less my prep.

The film is very sex-positive. Do you think this message of sexual pleasure being liberating is radical these days? I guess you could consider it radical in the sense that we're not often exposed to this idea that we have this pleasure available to us. What's amazing about this film is that you have two people in a room and the environment allows them to explore these things. It also shows that intimacy and confidence are not just a physical thing. In the film there's not a lot of physical interaction, but a lot of conversation – a lot of navigation of the limitations we can put on ourselves, the fears or the shame or all of those extra burdens that get in the way of actually exploring good and healthy intimacy.

Leo starts out being quite inscrutable, before revealing more of his self as the film progresses. Did you enjoy this challenge of subtlety, in contrast to Emma's high-strung Nancy? I did. A lot of Leo's surface is very, very controlled, and I think the reason for that is he's in a space of work. He's getting paid to be in that room and provide a service. There's a certain amount of himself he can't really bring, and there's a certain amount of self-protection that he needs to stay on top of. I did find it a challenge, because I wanted to make sure that he felt real, and that his job wasn't just an image; there was a person living beneath Leo Grande as the representation. There were a few moments in the script in which we get a window into his life, but I think the writing is done well in that you always know there's something bubbling underneath. And I wouldn't want to even call Leo Grande a 'persona' for Connor, because I think he does use a lot of himself, even with a barrier there and the boundary that he puts in place. I think that's what helps Leo be a good sex worker for Nancy, leading her to her breakthroughs. Leo, at the same time, has an inner world that he's grappling with and trying to navigate.

What was it like working with Sophie to find your character's rhythm within the restrictions and limitations of the hotel room setting? When we were rehearsing, we spoke about Leo's body and where his confidence stems from, and the impression that he would give at the beginning. When a sex worker goes into a room meeting a client for the first time, they don't know the client's preferences. We worked on what that would feel like physically. Being in an empty space like that hotel room – your character really has to feel at ease and comfort within himself, because there's nowhere to hide on that set and within that room. It's about understanding where your confidence comes from

Home ENTS

UK

2000

Faithless

Directed by	**LIV ULLMANN**
Starring	**LENA ENDRE, ERLAND JOSEPHSON, KRISTER HENRIKSSON**

Blu-ray/DVD	**OUT NOW**

As unfair as it may seem, it is hard to talk about Liv Ullmann's *Faithless* without talking about Ingmar Bergman. Made not long before Bergman's death, the film, which was shot partly in his Fårö Island home and which features a principal character named "Bergman," was adapted from a script he wrote which follows a fictional story of infidelity that draws inspiration from an affair he had prior to his relationship with Ullmann.

Stylistically, *Faithless* is reminiscent of Bergman's films too. Featuring long takes and restrained camerawork, it consists mostly of verbose, stagey dialogue exchanges musing on love, life, and the damage that people do to one another when making selfish decisions. Structured using a formal device in which Lena (Marianne Vogler), a stage actress, gradually tells the story of the affair that causes the breakdown of her marriage to Bergman (Erland Josephson), a filmmaker, the film moves slowly through a narrative of mounting despair, showing how one ill-thought-out act of indiscretion comes to tear two families apart. Made in a serious middlebrow arthouse mode that has since become regrettably uncommon, the film – which runs almost two-and-a-half hours and covers the full spectrum of human emotion – is compelling for many reasons, not least the strength of the script, the delicacy of the direction, and the commitment shown by all of the performers. **MATT TURNER**

1997

love jones

Directed by	**THEODORE WITCHER**
Starring	**LARENZ TATE, NIA LONG, ISAIAH WASHINGTON**

Blu-ray/DVD	**OUT NOW**

Set within a community of artists and poets in Chicago, *love jones* captures the meet-cute between poet Darius (Larenz Tate) and photographer Nina (Nia Long), and the resulting will-they-won't-they relationship that unfolds. Focusing on a college-educated, poetry-performing, jazz record-buying, young professional milieu, *love jones*' producers purportedly wanted to make "a modern film about African-American life that did not use violence and recreational drugs as elements in the story." While such a thing should already have become commonplace by this point, it is admittedly striking to see a populist '90s film from a Black filmmaker about ordinary romance and friendship.

It is unjust that, to date, *love jones* is the only film that writer-director Theodore Witcher has been able to make. Despite not being particularly financially successful on release, the film has since amassed a cult following and deserved critical attention. Featuring smart writing, naturalistic performances, stylish cinematography, and a strong soundtrack, it is a sweet, goofy film that displays a distinct directorial voice and a singular aesthetic identity. Besides the obvious factor of racism, the smallness of this not-insignificantly budgeted production could be the reason why Witcher did not work again on a feature. **MATT TURNER**

Home ENTS

UK

1984

Man Marked For Death, Twenty Years Later

Directed by **EDUARDO COUTINHO**

Blu-ray	**OUT NOW**

Few films have as compelling a production story as *Man Marked For Death, Twenty Years Later*. In 1964, Eduardo Coutinho begun production in northeast Brazil of a fictionalised portrait of João Pedro Teixeira, the leader of a local land rights activist group who was murdered by military police acting on the orders of local landowners. The film's course changed dramatically following a right wing coup, resulting in arrests of the crew and the disappearance of the film's main actress, Teixeira's wife Elizabeth. Twenty years later, granted the endorsement of the government of the time, Coutinho returned to the region to continue making the story that he had originally intended, but also to show what happened in the interim. After successfully tracking down Elizabeth, he puts together the pieces of a broken production that mirrored the breakdown of the country.

Coutinho records new interviews with Elizabeth, who had been using a new name in hiding, and with her estranged children, who were unaware that their mother was still living. He then blends this material with recovered footage shot for the first film, showing these original recordings to cast members of the production and having them remark on the film's ill-fortune, their lives now, and the related state of the nation. It culminates in a remarkable metadocumentary on Brazil's fractured history of land and class conflict. **MATT TURNER**

1971

Luminous Procuress

Directed by **STEVEN ARNOLD**
Starring **PANDORA, STEVE SOLBERG, RONALD FARRELL**

Blu-ray	**OUT NOW**

The only feature film made by multidisciplinary artist Steven Arnold, *Luminous Procuress* earned its maker the approval of Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol plus various museum and film festival accolades, but also marked the end of his period of experimentation with film. Working mostly in photography after, Arnold died in 1994, six years after an AIDS diagnosis. The film sees two men being welcomed into a bordello/commune by its elegantly decorated owner, then treated to all of the sex, drugs, occultism and cabaret that the space has to offer. While first the pair are wide-eyed and fully clothed, soon they are wide-pupilled and naked – no longer shy observers of this circle but unshackled card-carrying members.

Created following a series of acclaimed surrealistic shorts, *Luminous Procuress* is strange by any measure. Episodic in structure, the film features interludes which fluidly segue one into another. The set dressing, costuming and camerawork heighten in luridness, floridity and ecstatic colour as the film continues its non-narrative descent into delirium. Coupled with its purposefully inaudible overdubbed dialogue, Warner Jepson's psychedelic synth soundtrack furthers the sense of detachment from reality. What it all amounts to is not necessarily clear, it is pleasing to see such unapologetically excessive spectacle. **MATT TURNER**

Twentynine Palms

Directed by **BRUNO DUMONT**
Starring **DAVID WISSAK, YEKATERINA GOLUBEVA, JEREMY DAVIES**

Blu-ray/DVD **OUT NOW**

A New French Extremity-era film that is both extreme, and extremely of its era. Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* is a film that pulls no punches, with a shock ending of the sort that became so prevalent in arthouse filmmaking at the beginning of the millennium that they stopped being shocking. In the film, which uses slowness and distance as an aesthetic strategy, David (David Wissak), a photographer and Katia (Yekaterina Golubeva), his partner, drive through various Californian desert landscapes, passing through a series of long, empty roads, beat-up truck stops and deserted motels that together make for a beguiling vision of ordinary bleakness. Ostensibly scouting for possible locations that David can shoot, the couple mainly instead just move meaninglessly through space, sometimes fighting or fucking, but mostly having faltering conversations that fail to cohere.

Viewed anew now, just under two decades after its divisive premiere, what stands out about the film is not the horror of its content – which admittedly is not just purposively horrific but arguably also unintentionally misogynistic in its revelling in the suffering of women – but the simple rigour of its formal construction: the commitment to using carefully crafted minimalism to drive home a message. America, as depicted here, is a squalid and desolate place. **MATT TURNER**

Putney Swope

Directed by **ROBERT DOWNEY SR**
Starring **STAN GOTTLIEB, ALLEN GARFIELD, ARCHIE RUSSELL**

Blu-ray/DVD *Released* **18 JULY**

A comedy created in the absurdist mode that underground filmmaker Robert Downey Sr. was famed for, *Putney Swope* uses a clever starting concept as a point from which to spiral outward. After the unexpected death of the firm's boss, Putney Swope (played by Arnold Johnson but jarringly overdubbed by the director), the sole Black employee of a Madison Avenue advertising firm, finds himself accidentally elected president. He fires all existing staff and hires a new entirely Black workforce, pushing the organisation in a bold new revolutionary direction.

Mixing unflinching satire with moments which are more wilfully zany, *Putney Swope* fires off gags at a rapid rate and to varying degrees of efficacy. The best moments are those when this 16mm black-and-white film switches unexpectedly to colour to show the adverts that Swope's team have created. These increasingly surreal interludes combine the film's brand of wacky humour with genuine filmic artistry. Made adjacent to the world of Hollywood at the tail-end of the '60s, Robert Downey's film feels both very much a product of its time and somehow also ahead of it. It is an unpredictable, scrappy work that is the result of a filmmaker trying to push forward earnestly in a new direction, unafraid of risking alienation. Few films are as outright odd as this; the film's sensibility is polarising in the way that only genuine idiosyncrasy can be. **MATT TURNER**

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Words by **HANNAH STRONG** *Images by* **LAURÈNE BOGLIO**

Cannes 2022

Strong new workd from Kelly Reichardt and Park Chan-wook were presented at the world's premiere carnival of film.

Time moves differently on the French Riveria, to the point that 12 days can seem like a very long time when you're wheels down at Aéroport de Nice lugging a 20-kilo suitcase behind you. It used to be easy to divide the day by the well-appointed press screenings, but changes to scheduling now mean you can be going into a cinema for your first film of the day at 8.30am and heading back home at midnight. It's possible to cram your day full of films at Cannes if you're so inclined, and the benefit of the festival's recent switch from queuing to ticketed screenings – introduced last year – means the infamous hierachy system is essentially a thing of the past (even if they still give you a 'rank' on your badge, presumably so you can identify the Haves and Have Nots from a distance). All this to say I was away for less than a fortnight, but it somehow felt like a month in the pressure cooker of a film festival, slowly broiling away in 30-degree heat while thousands of people around me competed to be the first to fire off a pithy tweet about the new Ruben Östlund film.

I can't pretend Cannes is a particularly gruelling place to travel for work, but perhaps the pandemic had granted me an overly romantic view of how (and why) film festivals operate and what a writer's place is within that system. Increasingly I feel it's not valuable to be the first to speak on a film – arguably one of the attractions of going to a festival in the first place – unless you actually have something to say. A lot of the best films I saw at Cannes this year do not benefit from a 'hot take' reaction, and seeing them reduced to a Letterboxd punchline or a scathing social media one-liner left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Perhaps no film typifies this more than Lukas Dhont's *Close*, about the friendship between two 12-year-old boys in rural Belgium, whose lives are torn apart following a tragic incident. I had a deeply personal reaction to the film's content and it ranks among my favourite things I saw at Cannes – Dhont approaches adolescence with a visceral tenderness, and is so deeply keyed into the cruel banality of tragedy, that it feels so personal and senseless at the same time. It's a film I have thought of often since I saw it, and will continue to dwell on.

Contrast this with, say, Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* or Joseph Kosinski's *Top Gun: Maverick* – the marquee Out of Competition titles. I greatly enjoyed the surprisingly earnest thrills of *Top*

Gun: Maverick, and remain fascinated by what Luhrmann does and doesn't say about Elvis Presley in his bells-and-whistles biopic. For me the great beauty of a place like Cannes is being able to enjoy the spectacle of these budget-busting studio flicks alongside a film like **Close**, or James Gray's wistful *Armageddon Time*, based on his own childhood in New York City. Similarly, the likes of Park Chan-wook's *Decision to Leave* and Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* (which has made him the tenth filmmaker to win the Palme d'Or twice) will require more thinking, more watching and more talking from me. More than ever it feels as if films are treated as a fleeting thing, a disposable 'content entity' that is to be consumed as quickly as possible. I would like for that to change.

Kelly Reichardt's *Showing Up* isn't exactly about this, but it's a variation on the theme, with Michelle Williams playing a disillusioned sculptor who lives in Portland, Oregon and balances her career with working in admin at the art college where her mother teaches. It's a wry, acutely-observed film that really cuts to the reality of having an artistic passion in the death throes of capitalism – namely, how do you find inspiration and artistic fulfilment while also contending with your rental property having no hot water, a chaotic family life and a monotonous day job? Unfortunately the film played so late in the festival schedule that many guests had already left, but it's one I'll be readily championing throughout the rest of the year. Perhaps that's a useful way to think about the festival in general – Cannes is less a *plat principal* and more an *amuse-bouche* that sets my cinematic appetite for the rest of the year. This menu provided rich food for thought about artistic endevour, the elasticity of family bonds, and (per Park Chan-wook) the pros and cons of throwing your mobile phone into the ocean.

Speaking of appetites – a non-film high point of the festival for me was trying oysters for the first time. The waiter was aghast I asked for Tabasco to put on them. He shook his head and solemnly declared "*Catastrophe!*" before he dutifully went and fetched the hot sauce. I was moved by this man's weary contempt for my unsophisticated palate. It seems like an apt metaphor for how I intend approach film festivals and their unique challenges in future – always open to new experiences, but trusting my own judgement and knowledge when it comes to consumption

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A perfect digital companion to the magazine experience, our website is updated daily with new stories, reviews and features. Head over to see our detailed coverage from the 2022 Cannes Film Festival and interviews with Il Buco director, Michelangelo Frammartino.

Truth & Movies:
A Little White Lies podcast

Leila Latif hosts our weekly delve into new releases and discursive movie chatter. Recent episodes have included a look at Akira Kurosawa's Ikuru, as well as an deserved evisceration of Jurassic Park: Dominion.

Newsletter

Bi-weekly missives direct to your inbox, each a personally-written mini essay from one of our staff writers. Recent mail-outs have included a report from the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, and we have also recently updated our member tiers.

YouTube.com/LWLies

Our hub for video work of all varieties, including bespoke video essays, filmed interviews and the best new trailers. Head over to take a peek at Luis Azevedo speculative look at The Sopranos were it directed by Wes Anderson.

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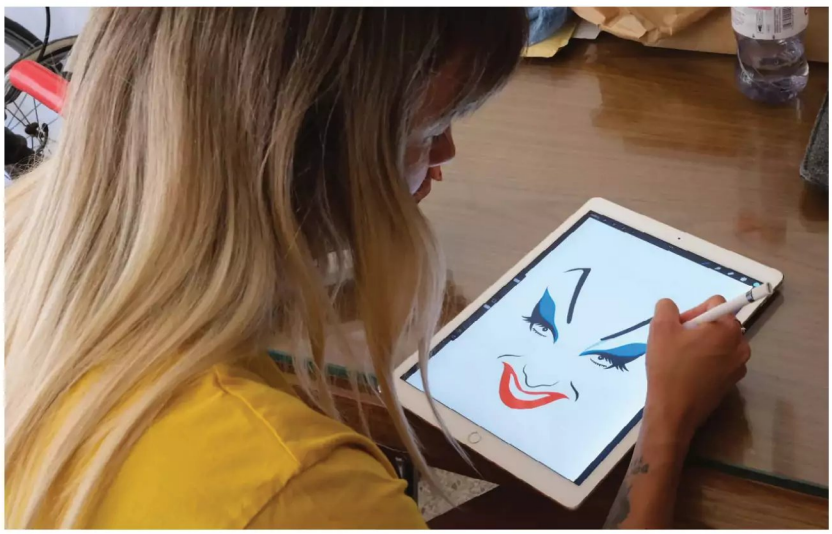

On the cover

Rosie Lea Brind is an illustrator and screen printer from Bristol, UK. I predominantly design and print gigposters, and have been a member of the Jacknife Prints Studio for 9 years. As a huge fan of John Waters, I was super excited to be illustrating the cover for Little White Lies' Pink Flamingos 50th anniversary issue. It was great to illustrate Divine's iconic features and work without the colour limitations that usually come with the screen printing process.

Ig: @rosielea

Little White Lies

Published by TCO
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Wanda Dufner is an editorial illustrator from Switzerland. Her portfolio can be found at wandamirjana.ch.

Fiona McDonnell is an Irish illustrator from Belfast whose work focuses on social issues, music, film, or whatever else she's interested in at the time.

Joel Millerchip is an image maker in Suffolk with a proud second city heritage, pen smith & ADHD thinker, find more at @joel_millerchip. F.P. Always.

Lydia Silver is an illustrator and visual artist from North Wales. She enjoys mid-late 20th Century pop culture and collects vinyl records.

Stéphanie Sergeant is a French illustrator/animator living and working in Poland. She mostly works with watercolour and animates in 2D. She likes spaghetti and the dark, long process of animation.

Feature writers

Juan Barquin (they/them) is a Miami-based freelance writer who programs the queer film series Flaming Classics. They aspire to be Bridget Jones.

Charles Bramesco is a freelance film and TV critic living in Brooklyn. A former staff writer for *Rolling Stone*, he has also been featured in the *New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The Guardian* and many other fine publications. His first book, a volume on vampire movies for the 'Close-Ups' series from *LWLies*, is available now.

Lillian Crawford is a freelance writer for publications including *Sight & Sound*, *Plinth* and *BBC Culture*. She is also a regular host of the Autism Through Cinema podcast and tweets @lillcrawf.

Soma Ghosh is a critic for *The Quietus*, *Little White Lies*, *The Companion App* and more. She hosts the feminist, polysexual podcast *What Goddesses Watch*, where womxn pop stars, authors and comics discuss the hottest TV and films by womxn.

Mark Hanson is a film writer and curator from Toronto, Canada, and the product buyer at Bay Street Video, one of North America's last remaining video stores.

Aimee Knight is a writer, critic, and the film editor at *The Big Issue Australia*. Her work appears on *Literary Hub*, *Little White Lies*, *The Guardian* and more. She's writing a book about Jim Henson's cultural legacy.

Sam Moore is a freelance culture writer from the West Midlands. He writes for *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *GQ* and the *BBC*, among others.

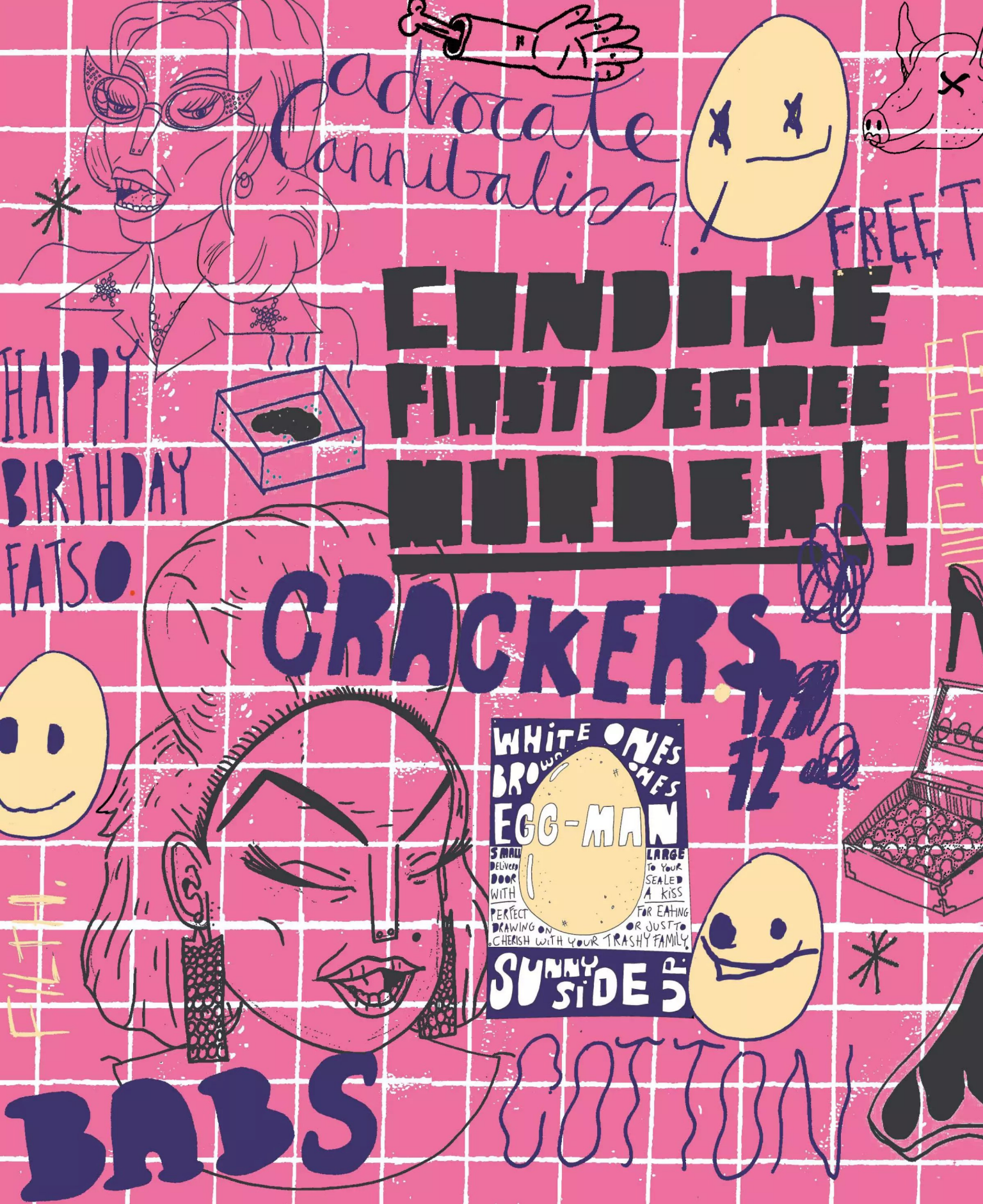
Christina Newland is the lead film critic at the *i* paper and a journalist on film, pop culture, and boxing at *VICE*, *Sight & Sound*, *BBC*, *MUBI*, *Empire*, and others. Her first book, an edited anthology called 'She Found It at the Movies: Women Writers on Sex, Desire and Cinema', is available now. She tweets at @christinalefou.

Purple Romero is a Filipina journalist who writes about human rights, gender issues, subcultures, music and films. Her articles have been published on *Al Jazeera*, *vice.com*, *The New Voice* and *Asian Movie Pulse*.

Zita Short is a New Zealand-based film critic with a strong interest in classical Hollywood cinema and screwball comedies. She also has a soft spot for late-1960s musicals.

Anna Swanson is a Canadian writer who holds an MA in cinema studies from the University of Toronto and is mostly proud of this as being her degree of separation from David Cronenberg.

Lucy Vipond is a freelance film, fashion and pop culture journalist based in London. She currently studies fashion journalism at Central Saint Martins and created *Snub*, a female-orientated film magazine.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MURDER!!
HAPPY
BIRTHDAY
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12
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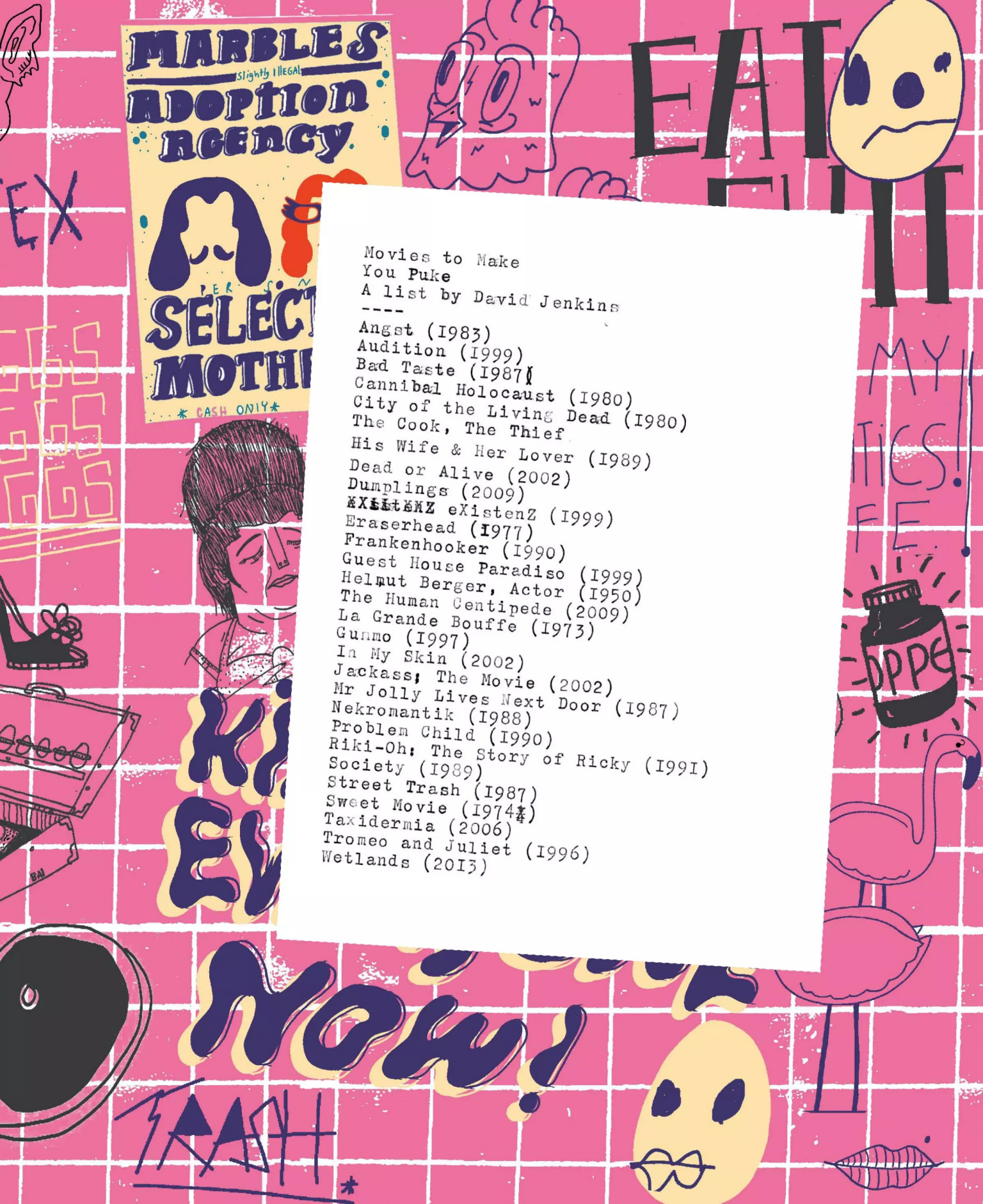
MARBLES
Slightly ILLEGAL
ADOPTION
AGENCY
SELECT
MOTHE
* CASH ONLY *
EAT
IT
Movies to Make
You Puke
A list by David Jenkins

Angst (1983)
Audition (1999)
Bad Taste (1987)
Cannibal Holocaust (1980)
City of the Living Dead (1980)
The Cook, The Thief
His Wife & Her Lover (1989)
Dead or Alive (2002)
Dumplings (2009)
eXistenZ (1999)
Eraserhead (1977)
Frankenhooker (1990)
Guest House Paradiso (1999)
Helmut Berger, Actor (1950)
The Human Centipede (2009)
La Grande Bouffe (1973)
Gummo (1997)
In My Skin (2002)
Jackass: The Movie (2002)
Mr Jolly Lives Next Door (1987)
Nekromantik (1988)
Problem Child (1990)
Riki-Oh: The Story of Ricky (1991)
Society (1989)
Street Trash (1987)
Sweet Movie (1974)
Taxidermia (2006)
Tromeo and Juliet (1996)
Wetlands (2013)
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